

MANDALAY
AND
BEYOND

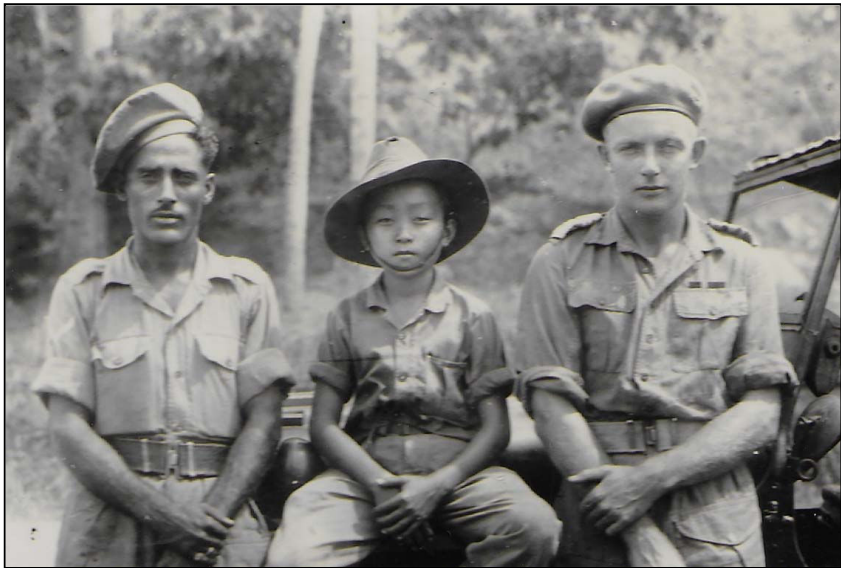
An Army Doctor's Diary

Charles Evans

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*The author (right), his driver Ata Mahomed (left) and Lim i Chi (centre) in
Jesselton December 1945*



Introduction

When Charles Evans died in 1995, he left a manuscript of his experiences as a doctor in the XIVth Army - Burma 1944 -1945, the so called Forgotten Army. In 1998 I secured a publisher - Leo Cooper of Pen & Sword Books - who wanted it shorter so some sections were cut, including a delightful account of two weeks 'leave' over New Year 1945, to Darjeeling and beyond in the shadow of Kangchenjunga (see Chapter 13). It was published in the Alpine Club Journal (Volume 110 2005) for the first time as a special tribute to Charles Evans to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the first ascent of that majestic mountain on 25 May 1955 by the British team led by Charles himself. In his own prophetic words at the age of 26, 'I was at the edge of what I wanted to do and yet it seemed utterly unattainable.'

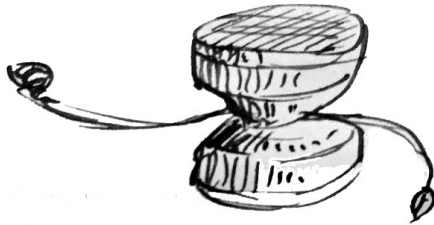
A second chapter called Kumaon Trek was also cut from the Pen & Sword book, A Doctor in the XIVth Army, and the remaining text pared down to about 60% of the original manuscript which is now printed here in its entirety

Charles Evans' recollections of his service in Burma are in a different vein. This quiet, unassuming young officer in the RAMC, who was mentioned in despatches in 1945, had a marked bent for exploration and mountaineering and was open to all new impressions. Unusually observant and perceptive, his keen eye missed no detail of his surroundings. Where most servicemen saw only an unpleasant and inhospitable environment, he was able to appreciate and to convey, in words and sketches, the geography and vegetation, the bird life and the peoples of Burma, as well as events as they occurred and the personalities and idiosyncrasies of his companions. He writes with

humour and compassion, in a simple, direct style which shows his deep love and understanding of language.

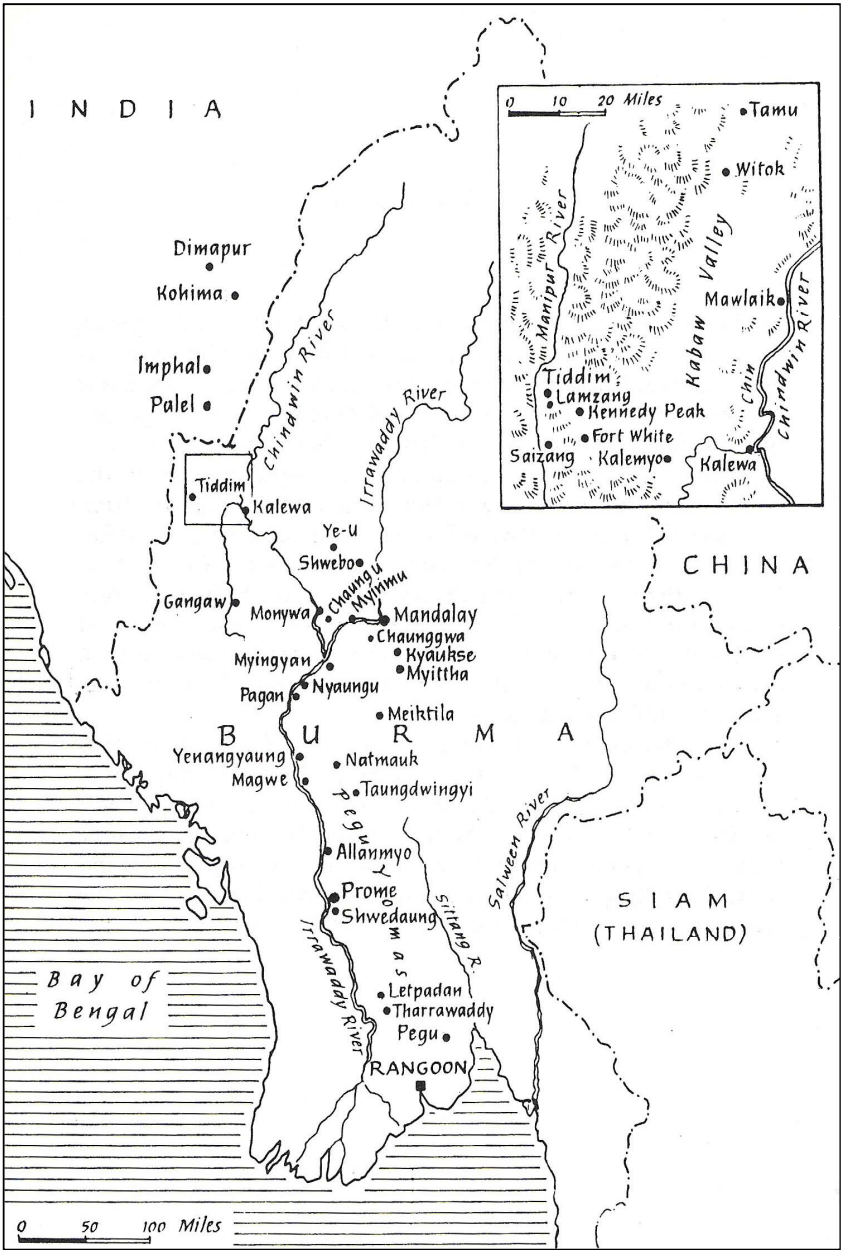
After the war he studied surgery and became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. He climbed and explored extensively in the Himalayas, was deputy leader of the famous 1953 Everest Expeditions and, in 1955, led the successful Kanchenjunga Expedition, for which he was awarded the Founder's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society. He was appointed Principal of the University College of North Wales in 1958 and was twice Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales. He was knighted in 1964 and died in 1995, leaving behind an inspiring and lyrical account of his part in the Burma campaign.

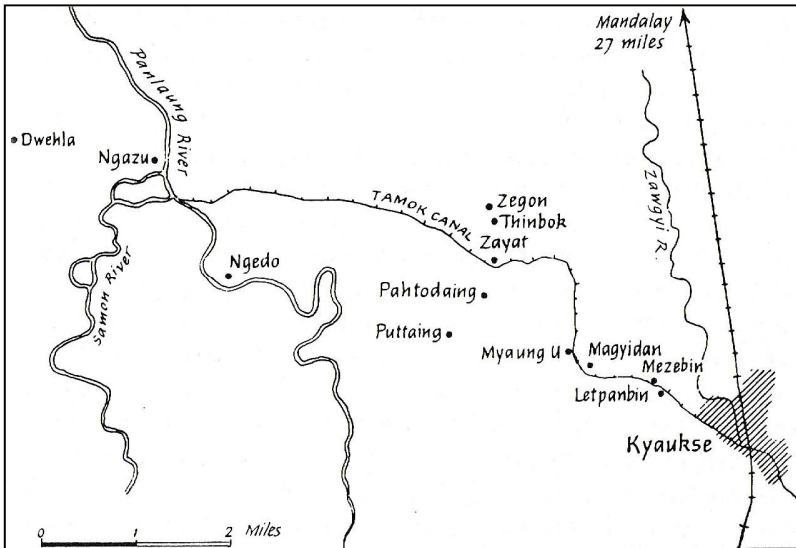
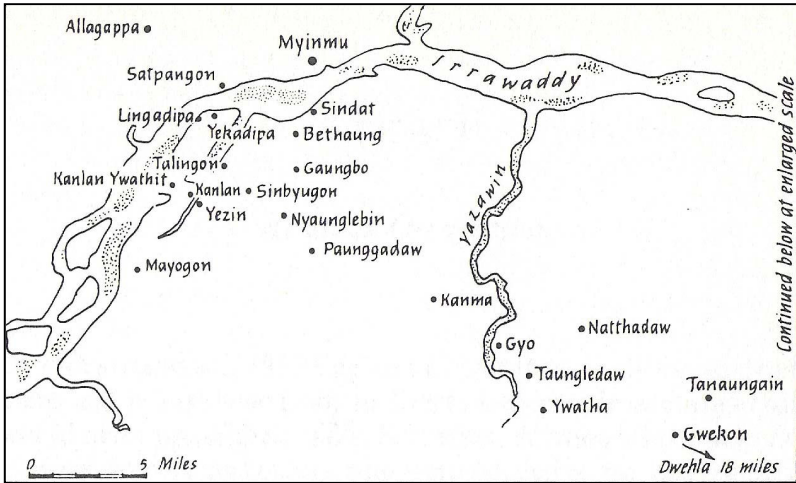
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Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Foreword | 10 |
| Chapter 1 Reserved Occupation | 11 |
| Chapter 2 Doctors in Uniform..... | 21 |
| Chapter 3 The Draft | 29 |
| Chapter 4 HM Trooper <i>Ranchi</i> | 37 |
| Chapter 5 Egyptian Interlude | 50 |
| Chapter 6 India and Cawnpore | 68 |
| Chapter 7 Lucknow..... | 84 |
| Chapter 8 The Assam-Burma Border | 105 |
| Chapter 9 Assam | 108 |
| Chapter 10 The Central Front | 136 |
| Chapter 11 The Tiddim Road | 140 |
| Chapter 12 Tiddim..... | 161 |
| Chapter 13 Darjeeling..... | 179 |
| Chapter 14 Central Burma | 199 |
| Chapter 15 The Myinmu Bridgehead | 205 |
| Chapter 16 The Devons (1) | 225 |
| Chapter 17 The Devons (2), Kyaukse (See map)..... | 240 |
| Chapter 18 The Race for Rangoon' | 251 |
| Chapter 19 Sitkwin | 267 |
| Chapter 20 Kumaon Trek | 283 |
| Chapter 21 Saigon | 304 |
| Chapter 22 Borneo..... | 319 |
| Additional Chapter Last Days in Burma | 332 |







Foreword

Senior Officers did not much like us to talk of ‘The Forgotten Army’, they thought it bad for morale. I liked the phrase; it was how men told you that they could put up with things; they knew that we were not much in the news and were low on lists of priorities, but they could laugh at all that, and they could carry on.

I kept a detailed diary during nearly all my short time in the army, and these notes are assembled from it. I have departed from the diary form where it would interrupt the narrative, but dates and places and events are taken from the diary and from letters. Without them many of the details would have been forgotten. Conversations are as I wrote them down at the time, and comments about people and things are my own as written then in the heat of the moment. They often say more about me than about the subject of the comment.

Although I have used the official histories and other material to place the story in the general setting of the 1944/45 campaign in Burma, I must emphasize that the book is personal reminiscence, not an attempt at history.

Some paragraphs, and some whole chapters, are printed in italics: they deal with the geographical and strategic background of my text and are intended to introduce the reader to the setting and circumstances of the story.

Charles Evans from *A Doctor in the XIVth Army*



Chapter 1 Reserved Occupation

In the summer of 1939 England was far from ready for war, but plans had at least been made to direct many people into work that would make use of their skills. Scientists, doctors, schoolmasters, farmers, miners and others who were needed to run the country found themselves in 'Reserved Occupations'; and the muddle of an uncontrolled rush to join the forces as happened in 1914 was avoided. It was all very sensible. The training of medical students was shortened, and if in the end they went into, for example, the Army, they went as doctors, and not as recruits who for some time would not be useful soldiers. It was assumed that doctors, like others with a special trade, would have much to give: like cooks and clergymen, mechanics and paymasters, they were needed to keep fighting men at the front.

When war came in September my return to work was delayed because of a mountain accident which had happened in August, and it was from a hospital bed that I heard Chamberlain tell us on 'the wireless' that we were at war with Germany. I had been climbing in North Wales with a friend and one evening when we came down from the rocks we found a party just setting out to recover a dead body that two walkers had reported lying in the South Gully of Tryfan. It was the custom to join in and give a hand. The gully was a sort of steep ravine with rocky sides and a floor of scree and loose stones, some of which were several feet long. The side walls were vertical in places and the slope of the floor was interrupted by drops of ten or twenty feet. The body lay at the bottom of one of these drops, and while lowering it on a rope a loose stone was dislodged. I was below and the stone struck me on the head, causing a lot of bleeding and, though I did not realise it, breaking my skull. I was bandaged and with the

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

help of several companions made my way unsteadily down the thousand feet to the road where I had a disagreement with my friend about who should drive the car (it was my mother's) to Bangor hospital. Fortunately he persuaded me to let him drive and we arrived without further mishap.

I was kept in hospital and the only lasting effect as far as I was concerned was the memory left by the look of the body we had gone to fetch. We guessed that the man had been unused to mountains and, perhaps surprised by mist near the summit, had taken a wrong turn which led to a cul de sac above the place where we found him. He was middle-aged and unsuitably dressed for his adventure, for he wore a cheap full-length mackintosh, a threadbare suit and light town shoes, the soles of which were worn smooth. His thin white legs stuck out at unnatural angles. It seemed to me, aged 20, a very pitiful business, and completely unnecessary.

*

When I went back to Oxford in January 1940 I found the place very different from the Oxford I had known. My friends who had not been doing medicine had left and were either already in the forces or were waiting their turn to be called. The colleges where we had lived were turned over to other uses and we lived that first winter of the war in Worcester College where I had a room in a part that seemed mediaeval. The small coal fire did not heat it; one window overlooked a quadrangle thinly dusted with snow; another overlooked the frozen pond and snow-covered lawns of the Fellows Garden. It must have been pleasant in springtime.

We ate our morning and evening meals in college; midday meals were taken at a sort of soup kitchen called a 'British Restaurant', a feature of that period of the war. We worked for long hours at the laboratories in Parks Road, in the libraries and later at The Radcliffe Infirmary, but we felt frustrated at still being students, and sought release for our energies in exercise arranged on the spur of the moment. When the pond in the Fellows' Garden at Worcester was frozen hard we found old skates and hockey sticks, and played a game with no rules. We called it 'Ice-Hockey'; a block of wood did for a puck and to play we needed thick gloves and several layers of

clothing, because few of us were much good at skating. On other days when strong winds made the water rough on the open reaches of the Thames below Godstow we took to sailing the 'National' class dinghies of the University Sailing Club. There were no officers of the club to deny us, we knew enough to do the boats no harm, and our outings on boisterous days did our discontented spirits a lot of good; the day usually ended in capsize and a swim to the bank before we could right the boat and climb in.

Then there were girls. For me, brought up alone and taught at boys' schools, they were unknown and enticing, a world of human relationships to explore. I may as a medical student have thought myself well informed but in many things I was very young, and ready to be taught. The shortage of men and the plenty of young and attractive women then in Oxford were good for my education, and my memories of the ancient city are romantic and beautiful.

Now and then old friends would come to see us; they were on leave from learning to drive tanks and aim guns, and with them I went the round of the Oxford pubs as we had done in the past, enjoying their talk and their company as much as ever; but their battle dress emphasized the difference in our lives, and when they had gone I wondered uneasily if I was doing the right thing. I went to talk over my problem with my elders; the advice was always the same:

'I know how you feel but don't imagine that you've been kept here to further your career. You're here because it is just conceivable that one day you may be more use as a doctor than as anything else.'

One or two gave up medicine at that stage and became soldiers or airmen, but when it was all over I did not find that those who did this had been much more useful than the rest of us.

When spring came Leslie le Quesne and I were asked by our tutor Alice Carlton if we should like to lodge at her big house in Banbury Road. The two of us had been taught anatomy by her the previous year and we accused her now that by having us as lodgers she was merely avoiding the possibility of having lodgers billeted on her whom she did not know.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

Alice, at the same time lecturer in Anatomy and Consultant Dermatologist, had immense charm. She did everything in style: her house was elegant, her big open Railton car with a bonnet a mile long which she loved to drive fast was elegant, and so was she. In the mornings when she entered the dissecting room in a spotless white coat which I would swear was tailor made, we knew that someone had arrived. All of us adored her but had at first been a bit frightened of her. When learning anatomy we had to pass a weekly test on the part of the body we had dissected that week; when my work was not well prepared I would go for the test to some easy-going demonstrator who would at least pass me, but when I was sure of myself and thought I knew the work backwards I went to Alice, hoping to see '80%, AC' on my record card. If I only scraped through she wrote '60%'. She never gave less, but told us instead to 'Come back to me, and I mean to me, when you know the work.'

At the hospital too Alice was a formidable person; dermatologists like to see all of a patient's skin before making a diagnosis, and woe betide a patient on whom she found a scrap of clothing after she had told him to

'Go behind that screen and take your things off.'

She knew very well that we all found her attractive, and she enjoyed it; while I lived at her house she found out everything about my private life, and lavished on me amused advice about my problems with any girl friend I had in tow.

During the summer of 1940 we listened together to every one of Winston Churchill's war broadcasts; Alice had a small portable radio which she carried everywhere, and anyone who happened to be in the house when Winston was to speak would gather round her to listen; we usually sat grouped at the bottom of the stairway in her spacious hall, Alice and her maid, Leslie and I, stray guests of Alice's, and sometimes soldiers on leave. We always listened without a sound until Winston had finished. His warnings of the threat of imminent invasion and his calls to face without flinching whatever lay ahead bound us together as one, afraid of nothing - as long as Winston's words sounded in our ears.

We were fed all that summer with news and rumour: the overrunning of the Low Countries, the dropping into Holland of German parachutists dressed as nuns, the fall of France and the evacuation from Dunkirk, and above all the Battle of Britain, to news about which we listened each day. When I try to recall my state of mind at this critical time in our history, I find it difficult to believe that with such knowledge of events as we were given watched and played at being Home Guards but I utterly failed, as I think did many of us, to recognise that real Germans with real tanks, rifles and bayonets might arrive in a matter of days on our country roads and in our Oxfordshire villages.

From time to time there were 'Air Raid Exercises'. The hospital was warned to receive casualties and we as students were all given jobs to do. The 'casualties', on stretchers, carried labels to describe their injuries, and were suitably bandaged and splinted and daubed with red. I could never, then or later, in the army, take these exercises seriously; it was too tempting to mark the label 'DIED' and let the bored victim get up and go to look for a cup of tea.

It was easy even then at Oxford to follow study and pleasure very much as one chose, careless of the world. I came easily under the spell of undergraduate life when I first went there; and the lovely old buildings, the wide empty streets, and the rivers and meadows continued to delight me in the years that followed, and I grew to love the surrounding country and to make a habit of roaming over it whenever I was free. We walked the length of the Chilterns from the water-cress fields of Ewelme, wandered by day or night over the Cotswolds and the Berkshire Downs, and slept under the stars or under the beeches that grew in clumps on the tops; in winter we might need a sleeping bag and small tent, but in summer there was no need. On these excursions I would only be brought back to wartime reality when a country policeman challenged me at night to show my identity card, or when, as I walked into Oxford by the Iffley Road, I saw over Cowley new Spitfires being thrown by test pilots into impossible dives and climbs.

The inconveniences that the war brought us were only small, like the rationing of food and clothes, and we managed very well: our various landladies used up our ration of meat and fat at breakfast and

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

lunch and in the evenings we visited a cafeteria in the middle of the city; clothes rationing was no problem for students who wore white hospital coats for much of the day. We rarely travelled, but if I did get away for a week or two to visit my home in North Wales I usually hitch-hiked. If I went by train I would stand most of the way in the crowded corridors; the trains stopped at one anonymous station after another (all station names had been taken down so as not to 'help the enemy') and as the train slid to a halt at these stations I would look down on patient upturned faces: soldiers thronged the platforms, soldiers laden with packs and kitbags searching for somewhere to board.

Stern reminders of war came after the invasion of France. One quiet sunny day I walked up by the Thames to Godstow. I was used to seeing across the river from the towpath the deserted expanse of Port Meadow where birds and a few grazing horses were as a rule the only signs of life. On this day there were men everywhere, standing about in small groups, brown, shirt-sleeved, in battle dress; near each group small arms were stacked between bivouac tents, and cooking fires were lit; I was looking at survivors of Dunkirk. Back at the hospital more men from Dunkirk appeared; these were wounded Belgians who had fought their way back to the beaches and deeply resented King Leopold's recent capitulation to the Germans. Unfortunately only a children's ward which was for some reason named 'Leopold' was immediately available and there they went. It was no doubt an excusable error at the time but some of the wounded who saw the name on the wall as the trolleys passed into the ward raised their heads to spit. About a week after Dunkirk I shared my breakfast table with a stranger in an infantry Major's uniform; he wanted to talk about the retreat to the beaches. He had been given orders, he said, to blow a bridge over a river when his unit was safely across and was about to carry out the orders when an officer in French uniform tried to stop him, saying that more troops were waiting to cross. His orders had been to destroy the bridge now, and it occurred to him that anyone might wear a French uniform.

'Christ !' I said, 'what did you do?' 'I had to shoot him, didn't I?' he said, going on with his breakfast.

One incident over Oxford itself on a beautiful hot Sunday afternoon in midsummer affected us deeply. It was the sort of day which drew everyone out on the river and recalled for a moment the atmosphere of Oxford before the war: punts full of noisy, cheerful men and women passed up and down the Cherwell. We had tied our punt to the bank near Marsden Ferry and were lying in the grass gazing idly at a Wellington bomber which moved in level flight slowly across our sky. We suddenly saw the nose point down and the Wellington begin to dive. We watched without a sound, becoming aware, unbelievably, that we were about to be in the presence of disaster. No one was going to pull this aeroplane out of its dive into the middle of North Oxford. It disappeared in an orange flash surmounted by a great column of black smoke, and a dreadful quiet fell on the river.

*

Before 1939 there had only been five or six clinical students at the Radcliffe Infirmary. Oxford students, after the first three years, chose as a rule to go on to one of the big London teaching hospitals. Those hospitals, when war began, were themselves moved out into the country and arrangements for clinical teaching at Oxford were expanded to accommodate more than fifty students. The Radcliffe gained much as a teaching hospital by being in a university city and also close to a centre of manufacturing industry. Some university departments studied sciences allied to medicine, and the hospital's nearness to Morris Motors brought the benefactions of Lord Nuffield and the creation of Nuffield departments of Medicine, Surgery, Anaesthetics, Obstetrics and Orthopaedics. The professors and their assistants in these specialised hospital departments gave an international standing to what was already a good small hospital, and the amount and quality of teaching available at The Radcliffe was increased by the voluntary return from retirement of distinguished men who saw the urgent need created by the war, such men as Findlay from Glasgow, Gask from 'Bart's' and Sir Arthur Hurst from 'Guy's', men by whom we should never otherwise have been taught.

There were also men from overseas, Trueta from Barcelona with recent experience of the Spanish Civil War, and the two Guttman, who were no relation but were both refugees from Nazi Germany.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

Erich, by letting me listen at his clinics, and then talking to me, taught me more psychiatry than I ever learnt from anyone else, or any book; he moved later to an important post at the Maudsley Hospital. Ludwig, who with his family used my mother's home in Wales for holidays, later became famous for his work at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital for Spinal Injuries; he became 'Sir Ludwig' but I remember him as a friendly martinet, obsessed by the effect of spinal injuries on sweating: he made us paint his patients with powders which changed colour when moist; then, with hot drinks and exposure to radiant heat, he made the patients sweat; he then photographed them to record where they had sweated. This helped to locate the site of the injury and earned him the nickname 'Sweaty Guttman'.

Men like Trueta and Cairns, the Nuffield Professor of Surgery, 'great names' in their own fields, were more than ready, if we were willing to listen, to share with us some of their wisdom. Trueta had experience unrivalled then of treating compound fractures in war, and many bombing casualties which had had their primary treatment elsewhere came to him at the Radcliffe. When we removed the plaster casts from their broken limbs he showed us how the maggots under the plaster cleaned away the pus and dead tissue and left pink healthy flesh.

When we started as clinical students the medical world was on the threshold of discoveries and advances as a result of which many of the illnesses we were shown became almost extinct, and operations which surgeons had not dared to contemplate became possible.

Blood transfusion was then still at the 'jug and bottle' stage, far from ready for the demand for immediate blood transfusion that was to come with bombing and battle. If a patient needed blood someone of the same blood group, often a relative, was put in the next bed and bled into a jug; the blood in the jug was mixed with citrate to prevent clotting and poured into a glass bottle hanging from a stand at the foot of the patient's bed. A dozen of us were brought into a ward one day to watch this rather unusual event, with interesting results. People often say 'Oh, I could never be a doctor; I can't stand the sight of blood'. We were mere spectators, with no job to do, and we stood all tense for perhaps a minute while a nurse began to pour the fresh blood into the hanging glass bottle. There was a crash as a front row student

fell to the floor, followed by several more in quick succession, like dominoes; those of us who had survived by skulking at the back of the class made hurriedly for the door. Soon after this display of mind over matter we all, if we had jobs to do, were assisting unconcerned at the bloodiest of operations. The jug and bottle era was at an end, and from about that time blood in many thousands of bottles was stored all over the country in refrigerator 'banks'.

The most memorable work then going on at Oxford was Florey's development of Penicillin for general use. Fleming had already discovered Penicillin but it fell to Florey and Chain to find out how it worked and to make it available for clinical trial. A stage in the purification, we were told, was to feed the crude Penicillin to the Oxford City Police from whose urine it was collected in purer form after passage through the body. If the story is true, then the policemen's contribution to human happiness was never adequately recognized. Now and then, as the work went on, Florey or Chain would call us in and tell us about it, so that later, when we were shown some of the early trials of Penicillin, we could guess at the future implications of what we saw. One patient was a man with an infection which had spread inside his head from a boil on the face, a condition up till then always fatal. Professor Gask, a very gentle man, drew our attention to the high fever, the swollen and discoloured features and the protruding eyes of the patient, now mercifully unconscious; he explained that as there was nothing to lose he was to be injected with large doses of the new drug. No one who was there during the next few days could ever forget the miracle of recovery that followed.

Cairns took the new drug to the battlefields of North Africa. He was by then a brigadier, running the Military Hospital for Head Injuries at St. Hugh's College and ruling that despatch riders must for the first time wear crash helmets. He managed to visit his Neurosurgical Ward at the Radcliffe, lecture to students and find time to do long (nine to ten hour-) operations on tumours of the brain. He was an arresting figure; his form was athletic, his manner intense and controlled. I had a temporary job at this time with his assistant, Joe Pennybacker, and 'The Chief' would sometimes surprise us in the ward, appearing in immaculate khaki, with the brigadier's crowns and stars and red tabs set off by the sober ribbon of a recent decoration.

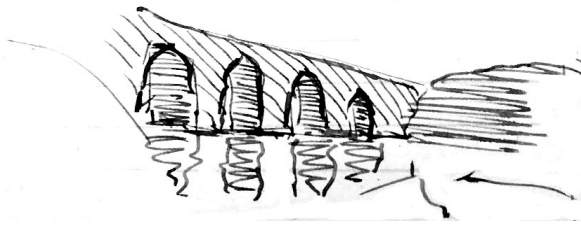
MANDALAY AND BEYOND

The opportunities at The Radcliffe were unrivalled and my only criticism of the teaching, looking back many years later, was that we did not become familiar enough with the 'common' illnesses that, according to an old saying among teachers in medical schools, 'are those which occur most often'. By the time I had finished, I had seen, and could talk too long, about rarities which found their way to Nuffield departments, but faced with a simple examination question about varicose veins I could have been flooded.

*

At the end of 1942 I passed my examinations and was required, like the rest of my class, to work for six months in a hospital before being called up. I became a House Physician at The Radcliffe, and worked there during what was probably the most momentous year of the war: the battle of the Atlantic reached its climax, Russia and America had become our allies, the whole of North Africa became ours, Sicily and Italy were invaded and in the Pacific the American fleet won the battle of Midway Island. We did not know that these were turning points in the history of the war and to us the future often seemed bleak; the beating of the Japanese in Burma and of the Germans in Europe were still two years away.

Any thoughts of staying longer at Oxford were soon dispelled for me by the arrival of my calling-up papers, and a very good thing too: I was becoming addicted to life as a hanger-on there. The papers included a first-class railway warrant and an embarrassingly lavish allowance of clothing coupons with which to buy uniform. The coupons allowed me to order khaki-coloured shirts, collars, ties, and socks, brown shoes, and Service Dress made of a handsome cloth called Barathea; this, it went without saying, would be 'made to measure'. At the same time I was invited to put in an appearance on 4/Sep/43 at No.1 Depot RAMC, Crookham, Hants.



Chapter 2 Doctors in Uniform

4th September 1943. No one forgets the date of his call-up any more than he forgets his Army Number. On that September day six of us got into a First Class railway compartment at Waterloo to go down to Fleet, the station for Crookham. I think we must all have guessed that we were doctors and going to the same place but there was no conversation. I found later that two had been in general practice for some years and that the others, except for a brash young surgeon fresh from a hospital job, were newly qualified like me. We were starting a new life and only one dared put himself forward before finding out in what company he was. He announced that in his first job he had been 'House surgeon to Mr Dott at Edinburgh'. That meant that he was a young man of promise but the remark fell flat and we sat in silence. The common fate of us all would be to lose our considerable sense of self-importance in a longing to please our new masters, to march and salute correctly, to stand properly and to wear uniform without embarrassment; we became anxious to fit, without attracting attention, into the machine.

The Sergeant who met us at Fleet was neat and quick, friendly but correct; his carriage, the cap perched on his cropped head, the battle-dress precisely creased and the glint of brass on his belt conveyed a smartness that was new to us:

'Church Crookham, Sir?' He checked our names on a list in his hand and invited us to occupy seats in the back of a covered truck. We relaxed slightly and climbed in. So, quite abruptly, began a delightful six weeks during which we were told each minute of the day exactly where to go and what to do. We lived in a sprawl of dark wooden huts smelling of creosote; they were called 'Spiders'. We shared rooms and to each group of four students a batman was allotted; he brought tea in the morning and looked after our clothes

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

and equipment. My batman, while laying out uniform or polishing shoes, was in the habit of handing out a great deal of useful and amusing advice about life. When a doctor enlisted he was given what was called an 'emergency commission' which lasted until demobilisation. If you were like me and had no specialist qualification you began as a lieutenant and, with no special effort on your part, became a captain at the end of twelve months. The man who shared a room with me had been Resident Surgical Officer in a large hospital; he was already a Fellow of The Royal College of Surgeons and on passing out of Crookham would at once become a Surgical Specialist with the rank of Major. Very senior consultants entered the army by a different route; at a stroke of the pen they became Brigadiers with red hats to match, but we did not see them at Crookham.

On the first morning at the Depot we were taken by truck to the main barracks and given battledress, webbing belts, socks, boots and identical haircuts before starting our daily routine on the barrack square and in the lecture room. We were taught to write letters beginning 'Sir, I have the honour' and ending 'I have the honour to be, Sir, your obedient servant'. We were taught the categories of fitness from A1 to C3. We were taught that our options when making a medical report were limited and that a soldier might be reported 'M & D', Medicine and Duty, if there wasn't much wrong, or 'Attend A, B or C' which meant that he must come again or go to hospital. Only rarely might you write 'Duty' in red ink, because it meant that you thought the man was malingering, and the consequences for him would be serious. I never wrote it.

We were subjected to intelligence tests and formed a low opinion of such tests when we found ourselves to be indifferent performers; we were lectured on the history, organisation and administration of the RAMC and on how properly to conduct ourselves as officers, particularly with regard to dress. I had never before realised how much attention could be given to shoe polish, how many kinds there were and how important it was that you instruct your batman to select and use only your favoured brand and shade. We did 'PT' and a bit of running, not very much, along roads and across country. We did exercises with map and compass and we pretended to set up

Regimental Aid Posts for imaginary battles. We carried each other by 'Fireman's Lift' for absurd distances, a trial which was worse for the one being carried than for the carrier; the discomfort was only experienced to the full when slung over the shoulders of a very small man who had difficulty in keeping his feet. We were sent over obstacle courses where there were fire-crackers which sounded like crow-scarers and were meant to simulate bursting shells; there were also notices telling us that there was poison gas about, and we conscientiously went through the drill for dealing with gas. I found it difficult to take it all seriously and when dropped in wildest Surrey from a closed truck and told to find the way across country to some grid reference which I recognised as a pub in Guildford I was in the habit of saving puff by waiting for a passing motorist to give me a lift. We were all shapes, sizes and ages, and whether the exercises were enjoyable or hateful depended mainly on what a man had been doing before he came to Crookham. I was young and moderately fit and I enjoyed myself. My completely passive role was pleasantly restful after the responsibilities of a job in a busy hospital and I loved the golden September days out of doors in the Hampshire countryside.

I was in love at the time; Betty was a charmer whom I had got to know at Oxford, and by good fortune it was easy for us to meet while I was at Crookham. I set myself to learn Kipling's poem 'The Long Trail' by heart: it suited my mood and fitted in with my enjoyment of early autumn; also, it was full of the excitement of adventuring overseas. When I read it now the vivid happiness of those English days floods back with memories of the contradictory feelings aroused on one hand by love and on the other by the prospect of travel and adventure. It was not difficult to guess where we might go after Crookham. Some would wait for a Second Front, some go to Italy as replacements and the rest go east to India: 1942 had been a disastrous year in Burma. At Crookham we always changed into Service Dress for dinner. We were given careful instructions about the ritual to follow each evening on entering the Mess. First catch the eye of the Commandant, stand to attention and say 'Good evening, Sir.' In the relaxed atmosphere over drinks we were then free to get to know our instructors. All of them had seen active service and one or two of them wore decorations. We found that one had been in Crete when the Germans came, another had been at Tobruk. It was not long

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

before our academic medical aspirations seemed not to matter quite so much, and our slightly mocking airs of superiority about the army gave way to respect and admiration for these tough-looking doctors. They knew from first-hand experience what they were talking about when they gave us lectures about battle, and we learned from them that though not one in ten of us would ever accomplish a salute that pleased a drill sergeant, we did not in the field have to look like professional soldiers to do our work as well as the next man.

From Crookham we went for a week to the Army School of Hygiene, Mytchett. Hygiene, like Dietetics and Social Medicine, had always bored me, but I was pleased to find that at Mytchett we were taught practical things: how to build make-shift ovens in the open with stones and clay, how to cook over a flame produced by dropping a mixture of oil and water on a hot steel plate, the Oil and Water Splash Fire. I next saw it in Egypt where it was used instead of coal to heat the boilers of railway engines. The only useful thing of that kind that they did not show us at Mytchett was that you could boil water for tea over a mixture of water and petrol; that was something I learnt later from the soldiers themselves.

The army's alphabetical system of classification was illustrated for us by the example 'Plates, porridge, rubber, officers, lunatic, for the use of'. At Mytchett it was used seriously to introduce us to 'Case, army, water-testing. poisons' and 'Case, army, water-testing, sterilisation' the latter commonly known as 'The Horrocks box'. I found the common name useful later when I had to ask NCOs where the box was or what it had shown; its function was to show how much chlorine powder to add to water to make it safe to drink, and it was invented by the father of the well-known general and historian, Sir Brian Horrocks. The only tutor, as opposed to gadget, that I remembered afterwards from our time at Mytchett was McKenny-Hughes, an entomologist disguised in the uniform of an Army major. He entertained us for hours with descriptions and demonstrations on stage of the disgusting life-style of the housefly. He was a portly man with long lean arms and legs. He stooped slightly before the class, took a few quick steps forward, and then stopped, briskly rubbing together his rather large hands, now behind the small of his back, now in front of his face, now above his head.

O lovely entomologist! I did not forget you. I was to remember you over many a Burmese cesspit and stained Indian tablecloth.

When Crookham had done its best for us we each had a final interview with the Colonel Commandant, who asked me if there was anywhere I should specially like to be posted. It was some time since I had been asked any question to which an answer requiring thought was expected and for a minute I was stunned and blurted out 'Anywhere where there are mountains, Sir'. This was obviously not the right answer and the Colonel's face showed a sharp lessening of interest (I found afterwards that the man before me had said 'Paratroops, Sir'). In the morning I was ordered to report to a commandeered hotel in Lower Sloane St. for a crash course at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, after which I should be given two weeks' embarkation leave.

There were very few air raids on London in October 1943 but when there was one we used to go out into Sloane Square to watch the play of searchlights. We heard no bombs but there was a great deal of anti-aircraft fire and we could hear the tinkle of falling splinters and the voices of air raid wardens shouting to us to get under cover and not be bloody fools. One of the lessons of war was that the fire of your own side could do you just as much harm as that of the enemy, and that it was sometimes more likely to find you.

Professor Sir Philip Manson-Bahr looked distinguished; he was tall, spare and white haired, and dressed in dark suits. He began his first lecture to us 'Gentlemen, there are two sorts of Fevah: there is Fevah, and there is Damn Bad Fevah. Fevah is what you will get when you are living at Poonah, but Damn Bad Fevah you will get when you go into the Jungle-ah, to shoot Tigah.' He guided us in his kindly way through the details of the domestic lives of malaria parasites and of their hosts, the Anopheles mosquitoes, and we learned to recognise under the microscope human blood cells infected with the pretty coloured rings and dots of the parasites. Less than six months later I was seeing them every day and becoming heartily sick of them. We were lectured and given notes to read about other tropical illnesses: hookworm, bilharzia, dengue, sandfly fever and no doubt scrub typhus, though I do not remember it being taught on the course; it happened to be an illness of which I was later to see too much. No

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

one can teach clinical medicine in the lecture room, and the only disease of which I got a clear picture which I afterwards found true to life was malaria. The description was taken from the native Africans who said that malaria was at first like being tied down on a cot while relays of little men brought buckets of ice-cold water to throw over you; as they fetched more buckets of iced water, you shivered violently and piled on blankets to ward off the chill. Then they lit fires under your cot and produced great heat and you sweated and flung off the blankets while more tormentors with mallets hit you on the head until the pain was unbearable. When they had finished you were too weak to move.

My last week at the School of Tropical Medicine was disturbed. Betty of course knew about my embarkation leave and suddenly wrote to suggest that we get married and spend my leave as a honeymoon. As I sat in the lecture rooms of Gower Street my head was filled with delicious pictures of making love to Betty for two weeks on end in some remote cottage. Embarkation leave in wartime produced a tangle of emotions that were only straightened out when the last day came and one began a new life.

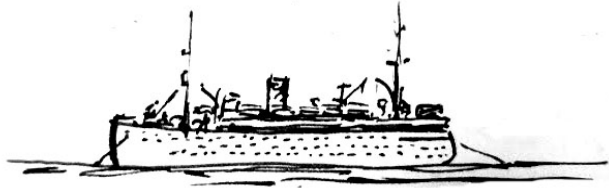
I was 24 years old and my upbringing in a Welsh Calvinistic Methodist community, followed by English public school and university had left me young for my age: I was still smarting slightly from having just been told exactly this by the same Betty who now suggested marriage. She had added for good measure in that emotional moment that I ought, when older, to marry a woman at least ten years younger than myself. I knew already that I fell in love very easily and that, guided by a deep instinct to be free, I shied away from relationships when they threatened to become lasting; in another age we might have had less of a problem, but this was 1943 and we were prisoners of our generation and class. Besides, my problem might not have had an answer related only to sex: in my insecure world I needed reassurance and symbols of stability. Now that I was going overseas for I did not know how many years I realised when I thought calmly that I now had other matters to attend to. Whatever my passing fancies, I was devoted to my mother, and during my last fortnight at home she deserved most of my attention.

My mother was a stalwart character who had been widowed when my father was killed in France during the last months of the first war, before I was born. Photographs taken of her then show her as looking young and attractive; she was also strong minded. Helped by her several brothers and sisters she brought me up and saw to it that I had the best education that she could afford. We were helped out by my getting one or two scholarships and attending school as a day boy, which was cheaper than boarding, but in schoolboy eyes demeaning: dayboys were 'skytes' at Shrewsbury. She even bought a house in Shrewsbury and we moved there to live. For her it might as well have been a foreign country, and Shrewsbury still the town where the alien Welsh were put out each night across the Severn over the 'Welsh Bridge'. She found there one Welsh family whom she already knew; in their house she was always welcome and at once felt at home, but the English she found hopelessly reserved and even after several years had only two friends among the 'proud Salopians' as they were called. She must often have been lonely. She and I always had a good relationship except when we talked of religion; she was deeply religious, a Christian, and this was a matter on which I rebelled as soon as I began to think for myself. We never let our differences about religion impair our mutual affection and respect, and the love between us remained strong to the end of her life. She had a good intelligence but had not been educated as well as her mind deserved. She used the English language only with effort, and sometimes quaintly, in a way that had charm for English friends and gave the two of us a lot of amusement.

I spent my leave at our home in Wales, near Corwen. It was a time of great strain for her, suffering at which I could only guess; she had been through this kind of thing during the first war, and my father had not come back from the taking of Albert in August 1918. I had been born in October that year. She was a stoical person, and met her anxieties now in 1943 with quiet resignation. She had always given me encouragement in my life and she had never interfered. At Corwen we were joined for part of the time by Betty and by an old family friend, 30 years older than me, and much attached to me. At this time of my life I was far too naive to see in him anything abnormal, and I was so lacking in confidence that for someone to attach himself to me seemed the most wonderful thing in the world. I

had shared with him my intense enjoyment of the outdoor world, and he, on his part, had done his best to pass on to me his enjoyment of literature, art and music. He had once been a schoolmaster, and during the years I knew him he indulged the habit of giving advice. He gave me a great deal of it; much was good, and some of that I followed. He had made a thorough mess of his own life and did not want me to make a mess of mine. He had been what is called a 'failure', totally so in his emotional life, and he had a romantic picture of what, by contrast, he would like me to be. My own picture of my future was not like his: he wanted me to be 'good' but I wanted to do things. Action was what I wanted. Our relationship continued for many years of misunderstandings: love on his side, and a mixture of friendship, pity and resentment on mine. Gradually, as misunderstandings increased, the relationship fell apart, but the letters I wrote to him during the war provided descriptive material which I used to fill out the diary entries from which this book was put together. During my leave the four of us endured days charged with emotion. We took long walks across country in what continued to be a fine autumn. 'The friend' was now launched in full career on advice about the dangers of a precipitate marriage; Betty was of the party but now in a minority of one; my mother, unlike the friend, made no comment and gave no advice either about marriage or about the future. After a good deal of talk and a bit of thinking I took a decision that was not then or later to make Betty or me happy. We became 'engaged' and that was all.

What began to stir in me now was eagerness. I was almost certainly going to places far away. I should not be among friends, not at first, and I should be without the security, love and comfort of which I had always had more than my share. But young men nearly all, deep down in their hearts, want to find out what they are made of. And I was no different.



Chapter 3 The Draft

4th November 1943. Boarding the train at Waterloo seemed like making a decisive choice, taking of my free will a final and committing step; but every step in reality follows from the one that went before, and every step has something final and committing about it - it leads on to the next; and as to choice - when I looked back later I saw only the inevitable moves that one after another make the pattern of a life.

At the Depot an NCO took me to a concrete hut full of iron cots with mattresses and blankets. I nodded to other newcomers who were sitting on some of the cots; as the evening wore on several more rolled in in various stages of drunkenness. All were MOs, but I recognised no one who had been at the Depot at the same time as I. Then we had been a 'course' for which the Depot had responsibilities; now we were a 'draft' to be 'kitted out' and moved on; we had no identities except a corporate one given by the mysterious letters RCYAG that we were told to stencil on our baggage. We did not understand the meaning of the code until we reached Bombay together; after that our mail, addressed with those letters, reached us all over India. We slid into casual and easily intimate friendships; we shared everything for a time and then separated never to meet again except by chance at the great cross-roads of the army in the East: Firpo's or the Grand Hotel in Calcutta, and the transit camps of Karachi, Deolali, Rangoon and Singapore.

We had one day in which to be medically inspected, be issued with kit, and pack ready to leave for Leeds first thing in the morning. I bought a large black 'tin trunk' for £5.19.6d. and stencilled my name on it in white: 291111 Lieut Evans RC, RAMC. We stripped in turn for inspection by one of the MOs on the staff of the Depot, the only time I was subjected to this routine for making sure that the soldier has not brought back from leave venereal disease, fleas, lice or any other

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

unpleasantness. These inspections, known as FFI (Free From Infection), happened to the men all the time - when they left a posting, when they joined, and at intervals between. We tried to remember that however dull and impersonal an inspection was for the MO, some men always found it humiliating.

We left Crookham before dawn and were met in London by a covered truck and a squad of men to handle our baggage. At King's Cross we settled in to smoke, read and complain all the way to Leeds. Arkle, Ken Arkle, was next to me, a tall, lank young man with hollow cheeks and a pink and white complexion that contrasted with his black hair and eyebrows; he had a twisted smile and a biting, quiet wit. There was something satanic about his looks. His peaked cap was cut high in front and when he wore the long, full-skirted army greatcoat, his silhouette recalled photographs of German officers. He smoked dark flaky tobacco in a pipe with a silver band and a deep bowl of dark wood from which moist bubbling noises came at intervals. We got on together at once and were good friends until we reached India and he was posted to Wingate's Chindits. Others in the compartment were Gunn, Easton, Boyd, Dawson, Cavanagh, Anderson and Brookman, all lieutenants and all with those letters RCYAG on their baggage.

The dull grey drizzle in which we left London changed to sunshine as we went north. The train was not well heated and we wore our greatcoats. I gazed out of the window, my chin propped on my hand, trying to fix in my mind a memory of England that might have to last a long time; I never saw anything so neat and green in other countries. We went along rather slowly, 'bumpety-bump, bumpety-bump'; I saw clumps of autumn woodland separated by patches of snow and at last, in the distance, rolling hills lit by the low afternoon sun.

At Leeds we were billeted in houses near a 'Holding Depot' in Hare Hills Lane, beyond Gledhow Park. I was with a Mrs Woods and her family; there were Charlie her husband, Derek aged 14, and her mother-in-law, a tired, ill- looking woman with a hard independent face and a splendid wink and sense of humour. I wrote home to say 'I am in very comfortable billets with a hospitable Yorkshire family. We drink tea all the time and eat a large Yorkshire pudding and gravy as a separate course before the meat and vegetables of the evening meal

which they call ‘tea.’ I stayed in Leeds four days and Betty came from the south to join me for a night. I found a room for her in a crowded hotel. She arrived one evening and could only stay until late the next afternoon. We were wonderfully happy and sad at once, full of longings, discomforts and frustrations, sadness and happiness. We neither of us liked Leeds, and the hotel, where the electric lights were yellow, the tables dirty and the carpets worn, was dreary. I took her to my billet where Mrs Woods’s mother-in-law, when she saw us, had a fit of winking. Then we wandered through the moonlit streets looking for warmth and privacy, sheltering from the cold wind in an alley behind a tower block where the clatter of my boots on the pavement echoed in the silence and a lonely man with a torch peered into every corner. When I saw Betty to the train next day all I could find for her to eat on the long journey was stale dry sandwich. We talked about our separation, happy until, like a fool, I spoke of things she might be doing without me. I was sorry I had raised the subject, but at last the train began to move. Despite the sadness of parting, my step as I walked away from the station was lighter and more purposeful. My life had begun to be too complicated for me to manage, and now it was simple again.

Betty did not like Leeds; ‘It is all so pretentious; these people have none of the graces of the south.’ There was plenty of money about, and what seemed to us to be ostentation. We mistook the manner of the north for surliness but the Leeds people could be disarmingly friendly. I found a seat in a crowded tramcar on a visit down town one day; I was as usual in battle-dress and a woman in the seat next to the window, who had turned her broad back on me just as I sat down, suddenly turned towards me and smiled, saying ‘O I hope you didn’t think I meant anything, turning my back like that; it’s only that I was looking out of the window to wave to my friend.’

We were lectured by the Commandant of the Depot.

‘Right, Gentlemen. I expect you’ve been wondering where you’re going. You’re going to India. Starting tomorrow, and the voyage will take anything up to six weeks.’ He went on to talk about security and the importance to us and to a host of other people of complete silence about our future movements. From this moment, we were told, letters would be censored, telephone calls might be overheard, and any

disclosure of information would lead to serious trouble. I was issued with a mountain of kit. The most useful was a 'Bedding Roll' made of stout canvas and shaped to hold blankets, sheets, pillow, mosquito-net and anything else you put in, like spare clothes; when rolled up and fastened with leather straps the bundle measured about 3ft.6ins.long by 2ft.6ins in diameter. Mine went with me nearly everywhere and was used by me long after I left the army. I was also given an assortment of old-fashioned camping gear which included a clumsy camp bed, canvas bath, canvas wash hand basin on collapsible wooden frame, canvas bucket, and so on; I was used to modern lightweight camping gear and felt as if we might be going somewhere with Kitchener of Khartoum. By rolling the camp bed into my bedding roll I was able to put everything into four bits of baggage: an old Gladstone bag that I had brought from home, the tin trunk, the bedding roll, and a kitbag. I realised later that the belongings of 'Other Ranks' for a tour of several years' duty overseas had to be squashed into two kitbags and no more. The most old-fashioned bit of equipment was a 'Solar Topi', an enormous pith helmet of a design which could not have changed since before the Boer war. It was like a large white policemen's helmet with an extension at the back to cover the neck; inside was a lining of silver paper and outside, on top of the dome, was a pointed knob shaped like a sweet chestnut. No one would have dared to wear it unless he was playing polo, and even for that he might have trimmed off some of its extravagances. Someone must have made a lot of money out of supplying us with these bits of Victoriana. Everyone on my draft had a topi, and outside Leeds I never saw one worn. My last sight of them was at sea near Bombay; the myth of the need for them had been discarded years before and they were being thrown over the side of the ship to float in our wake like dead leaves.

The last thing given me, and the least wanted, was a Smith and Wesson revolver. We had been taught nothing about handling a revolver, or about shooting of any kind, and even now we were not given any ammunition; all I was given with the gun was a short lecture on how serious it would be for me if I lost it. During my time in the army I lost three altogether; no notice was taken of these losses, which naturally I did not report, but every time I was posted to a new unit and admitted that I had no revolver someone insisted on giving me one and warned me of the consequences of losing it. When later I got to

Burma I made up my mind to make good my lack of skill; I planted myself by a river in flood and emptied the gun again and again at tree-trunks and empty boxes that came floating down. There was thick, uninhabited jungle on the far side of the river and splashes in the water showed me by how much I missed all the targets. When I came to the end of my supply of cartridges I had learnt very little more than that the revolver had a wild kick and that I was not up to using it with one hand.

There were two captains on the permanent staff of the Depot at Leeds; one was RAMC and the other was Yorkshire Light Infantry. They looked to me firmly settled into base jobs at Leeds, and none of us liked either of them. I was attached to 'X' company - about 200 men - and quite suddenly, after doing nothing in particular for two days, it became terribly important to do several jobs at once and to get them finished 'today'. We were given detailed plans for moving twelve MOs and seven hundred men through the streets of Leeds by night, seeing them into a railway train, and on to a troopship moored in the Clyde. From the moment the orders came we did not have a minute to ourselves. First came sick-parades, the men's opportunity, if they wished it and could persuade us, to 'go sick' and escape the draft. Donald Easton and I saw two hundred of the men before I dashed off to the Orderly Room to cash a cheque because I wanted ready money; then I attended the 'MI (Medical Inspection) Room' to vaccinate men paraded there for the purpose: when I looked at their records I found that most of them had been vaccinated not long ago and need not be done again; the rest objected to vaccination as a matter of conscience and wore the smug look of men who think that they have for once got the better of the MO. They did not escape the draft. My last job was to 'blanco' my equipment; when that was done I went back to the billet for 'tea': Yorkshire pudding again, followed by sausage and mash.

I went to look for a call box from which to telephone my mother. When at last the line was free (everyone on our draft must have been calling home) and I had spelt out the long Welsh mouthful of my home telephone exchange - 'Clawddnewydd' - I explained to her that she must not worry if for some time she did not hear from me. She and I always spoke to each other in Welsh, the soft and gentle Welsh

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

spoken in the Vale of Clwyd, and when I said to her that I must not say where or when I was going she said 'The place with the big mountains, is it?' 'Yes' said I, and after that there was not much more to say.

It had been a long day and after a mug of cocoa with the family (Mrs Woods called it 'Supper') I went to my room and sat on the bed polishing buttons and cleaning boots. I said aloud 'Well, Evans, tomorrow we shall be off to India.' There seemed to be nothing surprising about the momentous fact, nothing dramatic; there was just the nuisance of packing, the very personal sadness of partings; I did not seem at all to be setting out on a great adventure.

A pocket alarm watch woke me at six in the morning and two hours later I was on parade at Bracken Edge football ground, not far from the Depot. A huge man in the uniform of a Regimental Sergeant Major pointed me to my place; he had a neck like a bull and a voice to match and told me that he 'had never seen such a shower, Sir', indicating 700 undersized men drawn up to be inspected by the ADMS, the senior RAMC officer of the Area. The men had a disconsolate look; they were weighed down by packs and kitbags, and wore clothes that seemed several sizes too large. Some wore the Solar Topis which had just been issued; in the drizzle of a Leeds November morning their bodies were dwarfed by such enormous protection against tropical suns and they looked puny and forlorn. When the perfunctory but tedious inspection by the ADMS was over I went back to the offices of X Company, a mistake because I was immediately told to do a 'Health Inspection' of X Company's 200 men. When I had finished I was free until evening; I went into town to buy a few books, and then for the last time to my billet to settle up with Mrs Woods. She asked for 6/- (or 30p.) a day, perhaps £6 at today's prices (1987). I thought it rather much, but she and her family had been kind and I could not grudge it her.

At 21.00 we reported at X Company office. Anderson and Dawson were the last to arrive; they rolled up and saluted the two captains behind the desk and saluted: 'A bit late are we, Sir? Pissed as coots, Sir.' It took half an hour to form up with everyone present and correct, and at 21.30 six sections set off down the road for the tramcar terminus. I had charge of No.5 Section and handed it over to Sergeant

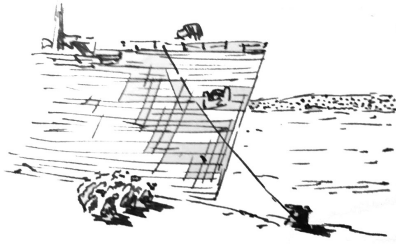
Taylor who knew what to do. Nothing I had ever imagined about an army going to war had been as exciting as this. The sights and sounds the night we left Leeds sent shivers down my spine: column of threes, full marching order, kitbags over every shoulder, and the singing in time with the tramp of feet - Roll out the Barrel, Tipperary, Siegfried Line. The drizzle had stopped and a cold north wind was blowing. Broken clouds drove across the full moon, making it look as if the moon itself were hurrying across the dark spaces of the sky. We marched down the cobbled streets, the men out of their billets at last, but knowing nothing of where they were going - not the port, not the continent even. People in hundreds came out of their houses at the noise; they stood in garden gates and lined the pavements to watch us pass. The local girls got in among the ranks and there was a lot of haphazard kissing as the willing and excited girls passed from hand to hand. The emotion was too much for one young soldier who had a fit and was left unconscious on the road. At the tramcar terminus a hall had been set aside for us and food was ready: bacon and chips, and unlimited tea; we poured what was left of the tea into water bottles for use later, on the train. Supper turned into a sing-song; there was plenty to drink and the party lasted till it was time to get into waiting tramcars. There was a double-decker to take each section and when everyone was aboard we all rode down to the main line station. We climbed into the special train and everything was fine: that is to say, no one missing. It was midnight.

The compartments of railway coaches were lit only by a feeble blue light in wartime because of air-raids, and in our compartment there was no light at all. Before we boarded the train the bulb had been taken by a marauding party of Royal Engineers; later we shared a cabin on board ship with them and they told us how they had 'found' the only bulb on the train.

'At OCTU' they said 'you have to have initiative if you don't want to be left without things all the time; it was when they found we had initiative that they made us officers.' We let up the blinds to look at the moonlit countryside and slept uneasily; I woke at three and ate some of my dry, stodgy ration; I was glad of the tepid tea in my water bottle. At 08.30 we reached Edinburgh and on looking through the steamed-up window of the carriage I could make out 'W.ve.ley', part

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

scratched out, on the glass of a station lamp. We were able to climb down to stretch our limbs and dig out enamel mugs for the hot tea that was waiting on the platform. The sky at dawn was salmon pink and turned later to pale yellow; as our train drew into Glasgow the sky was hidden altogether by low cloud and a steady grey drizzle of rain. We reached Gourock at midmorning, tired and dirty. The train drew up on a quay from which we could dimly see a number of ships anchored out in the Clyde. One of these was our trooper, HM Transport *Ranchi*, 16,000 tons, a converted P & O passenger liner. There would be about four thousand of us on board. We waited on the quay, wrapped in greatcoats against the north wind, until it was our turn to climb down into the lighter that was ferrying troops from the quay to the ship. Ken Arkle and I stood in the bows, tasting the salt spray as the lighter turned into the waves; we could see mountains to the north and west and I found that he was as interested in mountains as I; he, too, had been to the Alps, to Dauphiné, a part I did not know. At last we came alongside our ship and the long line of men, each humping two kitbags marked RCYAG like our baggage, filed up the swaying ladder to the *Ranchi's* deck.



Chapter 4 HM Trooper *Ranchi*

The cold salt wind, the crying of gulls and the tarry smells of the deck gave place below to the humming of generators and fans and the stale oily scent of warm air.

Ken and I shouldered our way down to 'B' deck to find our cabin. We had berths in what had been a comfortable cabin for two; the furniture had been stripped to make room for double-decker bunks made of canvas laced to iron frames. They were comfortable enough but I did not like having nowhere to stow my belongings: if I wanted tobacco or a book or a piece of soap I had to search through a bag on the floor, and in the bag everything was jumbled together.

The cabin was twice as long as it was wide and at the seaward end were two open portholes. We were not far above the waterline and heavy glass in a round brass frame closed each porthole when at sea. At night close-fitting black covers were clamped over the glass so that no lights showed when we 'darkened ship'.

We were eleven in the cabin, a mixture of doctors and Royal Engineers. The engineers were already settled in and as we took up the empty bunks they began at once to introduce themselves; Len Berger, craggy-faced, friendly and a bit older than the rest, was a Lieutenant. The others were recently commissioned 2nd Lieutenants; all had been through the ranks and gone to OCTU Len, Pip, Maurice and Bert, we were on Christian name terms within minutes. They knew their way about and taught us never to be uncomfortable or lacking a luxury when a little initiative would put matters right. It was they who at Leeds had pinched the light bulb from our carriage in the train.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

I went on deck to look round; a steady west wind was blowing and the grey shapes of ships at anchor were vague and indistinct in mist and rain. The *Ranchi* was just off the town of Gourock; farther offshore I could make out a cruiser, aircraft carriers, several waiting troopships and in the distance the *Queen Elizabeth*. Lighters went to and fro between the ships and the shore; the big naval ships were motionless, and to come upon them abruptly like this from inland Britain brought a sudden awareness of their power. A destroyer flying the White Ensign swept past us as though we did not exist and the imperious flashing of signal lamps up and down the river, but never at us, made me feel that we had now come under the care of professionals who spoke all the time only to each other. We were cargo, and the efficiency and indifference of the Fleet made me feel, more than anything else could have done, that our only possible response was grateful subservience.

The decks were crowded; as well as engineers and nursing sisters on board, and airmen, gunners, men from the Ordnance Corps and Marine Commandos; the commandos wore woolly caps and were shod with rubber-soled climbing boots which attracted my attention. I went below to see our men's quarters and was dismayed to find how crowded they were. In the 'mess decks' they were eating and living at long wooden tables; at night they slung their hammocks head to tail from beams above the tables so close together as often to be touching. It was hot down there in the mess decks and ventilation was poor; men already in their hammocks were naked to the waist. The conditions seemed just about tolerable then, at anchor in the Clyde, and I wondered what sort of hell this we were at sea and they were seasick, or later, in the heat of the tropics. And what if a torpedo or a bomb arrived here in the bowels of the boat! For relief I went up to the contrast of the cold on deck: the wind now was strong, and the sea rising; over Gourock the full moon sailed across the sky. Ken joined me and we leant over the rail looking into the dark water; the reflections of lights moved restlessly on the small waves and the light of the moon showed the white outlines of snow-covered hills to the north; the scene was indescribably beautiful. Soldiers were coming up from the mess decks and behind us I heard a young voice say in an awed whisper, 'Come over here Jock; look at that; fuckin' lovely, isn't it.' We walked up and down the deck picking out the November stars

in the clear sky: the Plough, the Swan, Vega, Cassiopeia and Pegasus: the planet Mars too, and Saturn.

We were allowed one day in which to write letters that would be posted before the ship sailed. I found afterwards that these letters were strictly censored; one that I wrote to a literary friend had in it some quotations which though innocent enough were all cut out. Nearly all our new companions in the cabin were sick for home or for a girl. Maurice, a small, dark, vibrant ex-miner from Yorkshire, had just married a girl from South Wales and now wished he were a miner again, if only it would take him back to her; Len, an architect with a good job, at 35 the most mature of us, rugged-looking and solid, had a wife and two children, and said to me 'No, Charles, I'm not exactly homesick but I'm bloody tight inside: if I let myself think, I'd cry my fuckin' eyes out.' Pip, who claimed modestly that before the war he had been 'only a bleeding pen pusher in a bank', had been married 12 months and faced with dismay the prospect of five years' separation. Bert, who was in the bunk below me, had married during embarkation leave and was quietly miserable. He had less swagger than the other engineers, and sported a small fair moustache; Ken, two years younger than Bert, said of him, 'Oh, he's all right; he'll be able to stand on his own feet after being in the army.'

Gomez looked after the cabin. He was Goanese, white-haired, plump, cheerful, olive in complexion and almost bald. He had spent his life at sea with 'The P and O' and wore their steward's uniform, dark trousers and a white coat with brass buttons. He met questions like 'Don't you miss your wife and family, Gomez?' with a kind look as if we were not quite normal: perhaps just then we were not. Gomez was everybody's friend, and patiently soothed our curiosity about each rumour that swept through the ship:

'Is it true that we are sailing tomorrow? Is it true that we are being diverted to Canada? or Iceland?' And later, 'Is it true that there are U-boats ahead? Are we near Gibraltar?' He came in with a cheerful greeting every night and morning to close or open the portholes and deal with the blackout.

13th November. I was given a job, 'Health Inspection' before we sailed, for 240 Marine Commandos; I found one louse; those men

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

were splendidly fit except that far too many were infected with ‘athlete’s foot’. I had to send them to the ship’s ‘MO Troops’ for treatment because even MOs were looked on as ‘passengers’ on the ship. In the afternoon I lay on my bunk. Ken was on my right, polishing the silver band on his pipe; he announced that it was a job he would give to his batman later on when he had one, not foreseeing that much of his ‘later on’ was to be with Wingate’s columns in the jungle. Donald Gunn on the other side was reading *Orlando* which I had already finished and passed on to him. The portholes were open and the low afternoon sun was shining in. Alongside was a lighter; the top of its mast was level with the porthole; the sea was calm and the mast hardly moved. We could hear winches creaking and voices on deck as crates of lemonade in bottles were loaded aboard, then a crash, the tinkle of broken glass and loud laughter from the deck. Each day during the hours of daylight the sounds of loading the ship had gone on but that evening it stopped and our mail was collected.

It was my turn to inspect the men’s breakfast next morning; complaints that ‘this fish is bad, Sir’ were disallowed when I had sniffed it but the porridge was a different matter: there was no salt in it and more porridge was brought. When I had finished I went on deck; the time was 0700. In the grey light before dawn the setting moon was visible, a few clouds and an occasional star. From the rail I could see the grey hulls of other ships anchored at the Tail of The Bank; we were together now, facing upstream on the ebb tide; we seemed to have been in the Clyde a long time.

14th November. In the evening after dark, above the ordinary noises of the ship, we heard the throb of engines and the *Ranchi* began quietly to slip down the Clyde. Ken and I stood on the tarpaulin-covered forward hatch; by moonlight I could pick out the outlines of Arran and Bute, places where I had gone sailing while still at school; Ken seemed to me still not much more than a schoolboy and I asked him his age – twenty-two and a half, he said. Arran grew larger and clearer and we slowed down to drop the Pilot. There was snow on Arran and cloud hid the tops of the hills; the sea was calm and the only wind was that made by our movement. Ken and I talked about the stars and I recalled once being shown the distant nebula in Andromeda, so distant as to be outside our galaxy; we picked it out

and with the help of other stars judged that we were steaming slightly west of South. Looking at the sky like that, we slid easily into talk about the Universe and our place in it; Ken said

‘The prospect for us all is so hopeless, so meaningless; I shall never have children, never.’

My rejoinder was that if I had children and they enjoyed anything as much as I enjoyed the look of the Clyde that night they would surely be as grateful for life as I was. I pictured to myself the joy of seeing again this landscape on a homeward voyage. It was midnight before the *Ranchi* passed the south end of Arran and we went to our bunks.

When I woke I could feel the movement of the ship and on deck I saw land to port and on the starboard quarter: we were coming out of the North Channel and were in the middle of a big convoy; ships had joined us in the night and I supposed that they were from Liverpool. Soon we began to pitch in the Atlantic swell. All day the ships moved west over a wild waste of grey water, those ahead of us clear and sometimes glistening wet, those astern dim shapes in mist. To the south was a mass of broken cloud; below it the sea was silvery. The slow swell met our bow wave and threw up clouds of spray; I could taste the salt on my lips. Small patches of blue sky appeared from time to time and once the sun broke through to shine warmly on us, but most of the day was dull and threatening. Towards evening the cold north wind strengthened and blew sheets of spray past the stem as the bows rose and dipped in the increasing swell. The ships had drawn closer together and I counted more than twenty.

Sea sickness was in my mind all day; after breakfast too pleased with myself and proud that I was not sick; in the afternoon with Ken up in the bows and revelling in the huge motion of the boat, one minute high above great troughs that fell away on either side, the next plunging into long mountain crests that threatened to come aboard, until fierce shouts on a loud hailer ordered somebody to ‘get those two damned fools off the fo’c’s’le’. After tea and a bath in salt water I rushed on deck quite sure that I was going to be sick. It was a wild North Atlantic night with a heavy sea and high wind; I leant on a dry bit of rail, staring out to sea; in the murk I could make out another ship

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

- just a shadow - and I glued my eyes to it and started talking to a soldier next to me. His face was the colour of clay and had the blank inward look of someone trying to keep it all down; our eyes were fixed on the dimly seen other ship and for a time we were silent. Then he turned towards me and his lips moved, so I asked

‘Where are you from?’

‘Glesga’

‘What did you do before this?’

‘Sellin’ sauerkraut to Lithuanian refugees i’ Glesga’

‘Do you like this better?’

He gave me a quick look as if I were demented and turned urgently to the rail.

There was something comic about putting 4000-odd men ‘without their invitation’ into a tin box and pushing it out on ‘the old grey widow-maker’; the winter Atlantic was frightening if you didn’t make yourself think quite deliberately that the box was in reality perfectly safe, except for torpedoes and bombs. After an hour of such cowardly thoughts I was very hungry and was not again troubled by sickness. I went below and climbed on my bunk to smoke a cigarette (no lights were allowed on deck’ and lay there enjoying the push and sway of the ship. Not so for Bert Haryles in the bunk below me; he was trying to be sick into a tin by his bunk, the sort of tin we normally used as an ashtray. I went down later to see how the men were getting on. The last companionway to the mess deck was as steep as a ladder and the smooth handrails were smeared with slime and vomit. At the bottom, through clouds of cigarette smoke, I saw that most of the men were in their hammocks, and the rest sitting at the long tables, only time and a change in the movement of the ship could cure their misery.

One day might differ from another in detail but the life of the ship followed an unchanging pattern set by the demands of safety at sea in wartime and the routine of eating, sleeping, washing and taking exercise. There were regular calls to ‘Boat Stations’ after breakfast and occasional surprise calls during the day to keep us on our toes. My station for the boats was No.14, near a long-barrelled 6in gun

mounted on the after deck. We were on the deck below the boat deck, and the boats would be swung out and down to our level for us to step into them. At Station 14 there were two lifeboats and 230 men. Each lifeboat held 60 men but there were also Carley floats lashed on the upper decks; if the *Ranchi* was badly hit and sank, those who survived the chaos below and could not find room in a boat might be able to climb on one of the floats. In case of abandoning ship we each had a kapok life jacket of simple design to which was attached a red light for use at night; it was said to light automatically when wet; we carried the life jackets all day wherever we went. At night below deck it was hot when portholes were shut, even in the North Atlantic, but everyone slept fully clothed, in battledress. Every man carried a tin of emergency rations marked 'NOT TO BE OPENED EXCEPT IN CASE OF EMERGENCY AND UNDER THE INSTRUCTIONS OF AN OFFICER'. They were to be a comfort to us later when bored on land.

We steamed west all the first night, and when Gomez took down our blackout at dawn I could see Venus rising; not long afterwards we made an alteration of course to head north-east; by late afternoon we were heading west again. For ten days we made a big circle westwards before heading for the Mediterranean, and during that time the ship was full of rumour and guesswork about where we were going. We tried to track our position day by day from our zig-zag course, guessing the distances travelled. The airmen on board made a crude sextant with stiff cardboard and by roughly calculating the sun's declination were able to make very good guesses at our latitude. Gomez, towel in hand, came into the cabin one day to clean up, tidy the bunks and chat with us. We had been having a lively, discussion about where we were. After many changes of direction the latest 'absolutely reliable' information ('This, old boy, is pukka gen, straight from the horse's mouth') was that all plans had been changed and that we were heading for Iceland where we should be garrison troops for the rest of the war; we were ready to believe anything so agreeable, and as we always believed that Gomez knew all about our position and final destination, we crowded round him:

'Gomez, where are we going to? What Direction are we going?' He grinned widely and pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, in

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

the direction of the bows. Another day he came to call us on deck: an aeroplane had appeared.

‘Steam chicken he come, Sahib; steam chicken’

A week after leaving the Clyde we were sailing south-east over high blue seas. The strong fair wind broke crests off the waves, and the white of the spray, the cleanly sculptured waves, the strong deep blue and the sunshine over all made the most beautiful sea I had ever seen. I stood at the stem watching the bows dip into the rollers, one moment almost up to the rail in a cloud of spray, the next far above an abyss of smooth retreating water.

After inspecting the men’s dinner I went to our cabin where I found Brookman and Dawson. Brookman, hands in pockets, was leaning out of one of the portholes and said to Dawson, ‘I wouldn’t like to be out on a raft in a sea like this, would you?’ For a long time there was no answer. Dawson was leaning against a wardrobe, wrapped in his own thoughts; Boredom? Women? Whisky? England? I wondered.

‘No’ he said at last.

Half an hour earlier a wave had come through the porthole and water was still sloshing unnoticed on the cabin floor when Gomez entered and smiled at us; ‘Water he come?’ He began to mop it up.

By 19th November the rumour was that we were 600 miles north of the Azores, which was not very likely to be true: it had been warm and sunny for several days. On the boat deck I sat on my lifejacket with a book, my back propped against the last boat on the starboard side; the sun was on my face, the water sparkled and I was out of the wind. There was a ledge for my elbow, my feet were against four inches of steel rail above the Atlantic. I felt as if I were on some rock ledge on a mountain climb. From where I sat I could see six ships of the convoy.

Ten days out. We were going east; the nights were warm and most of us slept with no clothes - after all, it would not take a moment to put on battle dress; I had lost the red light off my life-jacket; we were getting careless. I got up at 0730 to see Gibraltar but all I saw was a beautiful dawn with Venus bright in the arms of the waning

moon. We began to lay bets as to who would first see Gibraltar; none of us ever did see it: the convoy passed in darkness.

Like all troopships the *Ranchi* was a 'dry' ship but however unsatisfactory the arrangements for drinking might be, no one could complain about the food. When she had last come from America her cold stores had been filled with meat, fruit and vegetables, and we, coming aboard from rationed England, were fed in a way that we had forgotten; the quantity and choice of food, and the mere fact of being served instead of helping ourselves was like living on a cruise ship.

The army officers permanently aboard in charge of troops did not make a good impression on us; we were irritated like most people by verbal orders given out one minute over the Tannoy and cancelled the next. As doctors we were often consulted by officers whose men, like ours, lived in the cramped mess decks; like us, they were frustrated and angry about the lack of interest taken in their men's ailments by the army doctors that belonged to the ship, and by refusal to put at our disposal as doctors the means of treating even the simplest illnesses. It was galling when we knew that there were among us good doctors with half a lifetime of experience. As unattached MOs we kept an eye ourselves on the 700 RAMC other ranks; we visited their quarters, inspected their food, listened to complaints, gave out pay, censored letters and from time to time lectured on First Aid, Tropical Diseases and Anatomy and Physiology. But there came a time when exercise, lectures, and reading failed to relieve tedium, and the time of the next meal assumed an increasing importance in our minds. I borrowed a blackboard and coloured chalks from the ship's Purser and gave lectures which I could illustrate with diagrams. I kept the blackboard in our cabin and to relieve tedium Len and I entertained the others in the cabin, and visitors, with life-size sketches of the human form in lurid colour. He was a professional draughtsman and I had the necessary knowledge of anatomy. One MO surprised the rest of us with his tales of adventures with nursing sisters on the boat deck; he seemed too insignificant to play the Lothario, but we were too callow to know that no man was insignificant. He was a little man with a slight cough which came often into his pompous speech; once, after giving the troops a lecture on venereal disease, he stood by my blackboard and gave us a homily no one had asked for:

‘The (ahem) manifestations of (ahem) syphilis are (ahem) legion.’

‘What’s legion, Charles?’ Len Berger whispered ‘Is it painful?’

The engineers turned to practical joking, for which they had everything they needed: batteries, wire, something they called ‘Fuse, Instantaneous’ and detonators. Booby traps were set all over the place and for a time every return at night of the MO from the boat deck was followed by explosions from inside his bed.

One day all officers attended a lecture on India by the MO Troops, a ‘pep talk’. His language was obscene, he was insulting to regimental officers as a class and his account of tropical disease was superficial. I detested him and venomously wrote him down as a ‘conceited, pompous and obsolete old man’. Foot inspection of the men followed the lecture: too many of them had footrot or corns.

We passed two long afternoons censoring letters: the men had been given ‘Air Mail Cards’ on which to write home; these would be photographed and later printed in England as photo-copies which could be read with the help of a magnifying glass. How like ours were the letters of these men! They were worried mainly about the wellbeing of their families and the faithfulness of their wives,

‘I hope you are keeping yourself for me, darling, I am keeping myself for you’

- as if on this ship they could do much else. We were all depressed at reading again and again our own feelings at separation from those we loved; over and over again we read the same messages in every sort of misspelt and illiterate form. Never in these letters did I come across anything censorable, any breach of security, and to read them might have seemed an intrusion into other men’s privacy if their contents had not mirrored our own feelings; sympathy removed any guilty sense that we were prying into intimacies to which we were strangers. ‘Poor bugger’ we thought, ‘that’s just how I feel.’ After two days so spent we thought of the *Ranchi* as a boatload of love-lorn transportees. Later in the war there was more air traffic to the east and the Air Mail Letter displaced the Air Mail Card. The Air Mail letter itself, and not a photo-copy, reached the waiting wife or sweetheart; the letter was a huge improvement on the card, and could be marked on the outside

with one of those soldier's codes in capital letters; they ranged from Sealed With A Loving Kiss (SWALK) to earthier and more hopeful messages, like NORWICH.

Steaming east in a flat calm one day I saw a submarine on the surface and beyond it the faint outline of the African coast; at dusk what looked like a lighthouse appeared to the north, and the ship put out what we called 'Spoon baits'; the proper name for them was 'Paravanes'. They were a bit like the otter boards used by trawlers and were streamed to port and starboard from the bow on long steel hawsers; they were meant to catch and move away from the ship any mines that might lie in our path now that we were in shallow waters. Another change was that from a winch on deck we flew a barrage balloon on the end of a long cable; we were within range of enemy air attack. The ships of the convoy steamed in line ahead, in single file.

After Boat Stations on 25th November we had an hour's lecture on speaking Urdu, lingua franca of the army in India, then we did PT for an hour and sat round waiting for lunch, Maurice slumped in a canvas chair, looking at the floor, Ken reading *The Idiot* and I getting through another page of *Paradise Lost* which I started in the Clyde and promised myself to finish during the voyage; I was half way through it and Satan the great Voyager in the wild and waste parts of Earth had become my hero. We knew that we were in the Mediterranean and we made wild and too hopeful guesses at how far we were from home - perhaps 24 hours to Marseilles and another 24 to London. During the afternoon we passed a hilly point projecting from the African shore somewhere east of Oran. The cabin was so hot and stuffy that night that Ken, Maurice and I took our bedrolls up to the after hatch; the barrage balloon swayed gently overhead; Orion and Sirius above were brighter than we had ever seen them; how glorious to breathe air cooler than oneself, air which had not been used already by someone else! I slept well and was up at 0700 when the lascars came to sluice the decks. I could see Jupiter and Venus, and a pink sunrise in a clear sky. At 0800 we were passing a fairly large town; its square white buildings faced north-east and were backed by hills. I guessed it to be Algiers. Two ships left the convoy and headed shorewards.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

During that afternoon we conducted a pay parade, paying out the men in cash at small tables in one of the saloons. After tea the strident ringing of alarm bells sounded for Action Stations as the convoy was attacked by Heinkels and torpedo bombers. One ship was hit and set on fire; a column of black smoke rising into the still air long after the attack was over. We were told that four Heinkels ended up in the sea and that several Spitfires were lost. My post in an attack was a First Aid Post on C Deck, at the foot of a wide stair from which alleys crowded with men led to the mess decks. The sound of gunfire from above was deafening, a continuous rapid clattering of Oerlikon guns and the slower 'boom boom boom' of the heavier calibre Bofors with which the ship was also armed. A gunner came to me with a smashed finger and I put on a dressing before sending him to the ship's MO. A marvellous full-course dinner followed, and we slept below because another attack was expected at dawn. In the morning the BBC's version of last night's attack came over the ship's radio: 'Allied convoy attacked in Mediterranean with loss of eight enemy and a few allied planes; negligible damage to the convoy.' It was my first experience of the broadcasting of an event at which I had been present and it led to a distrust of reporters which lasted all my life. We steamed past Bizerta and Tunis, near enough to see buildings brilliantly white in the sun; by lunchtime we had passed Cape Bon and were out of sight of the African coast.

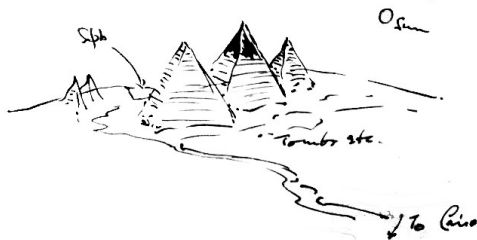
29th November 1943. No land all day. I passed the time playing chess and starting to read a book called *Astronavigation* which I borrowed from another MO. Action Stations sounded at 1615 and we rushed to our posts, missing tea. At 1630 the All Clear was announced and we gathered on deck for PT, but at 1645 Action Stations sounded again and I went down half dressed to my post on C Deck. The post, at the foot of a main staircase, was rather forward of the bridge and not much above the waterline. The men hated the mess decks when they could hear gunfire and knew that bombs were dropping. They crowded round me and I had great difficulty in keeping the alleyways to the mess decks clear. They sat on the floor, stood around, talked, smoked and all the time asked for news from on deck. Above the almost continuous rapid fire of machine guns and the slower sound of Bofors we could hear the explosions of distant bombs; suddenly there was a tremendous crash overhead followed by a deafening explosion

and the sound of running water forward. Tension mounted and there was a rush towards me along the alleyways. I thought 'This must be what panic is' and did not at all feel like trying to push past to see if anyone farther forward was hurt; all at once they were quiet again and after that the noise from above died down. The attack was over. A 500 lb delayed action bomb set to go off when well down in the ship had been heading for the *Ranchi*'s bridge when it was deflected by a steel stay, smashed through the deck forward of our position and left the ship by way of the side plating, not exploding until near the water. I heard that one man afterwards sat unable to move, staring at the hole it made in the deck as it passed him; three men were injured by flying rivets, one of them fatally.

Next day we passed Tobruk at lunchtime and Bardia in the evening, names well known to us from news about the war in the Western Desert, but places oddly unreal to us now that we were close at hand; men said that they had a funny feeling that they could just walk down the street to the pub at home, or send their wives out to fetch a pint. Nothing was as dramatic as expected; all was dulled to a half-tone out of which we were jolted by the excitement of air attack or enticed by the beauty of light on the startling blue of the sea.

In the morning we left the convoy and the other twelve ships steamed on; land came in sight to starboard, a mirage at first; at Boat Stations that day the look of the sea was always changing, more beautiful than ever: there were great stretches of light blue-green and darker patches of deep reddish blue and violet. The sun was bright and there were few clouds. The water near the ship was light in colour and transparent; the violet patches were where the surface was ruffled by wind squalls.

At lunchtime we entered Alexandria Harbour and anchored.



Chapter 5 Egyptian Interlude

The *Ranchi* was barely anchored when she was surrounded by ‘bumboats’ manned by Egyptians wearing red fez and dirty white ‘nighties’. In some there were negroes with skins of a marvellous glossy black. They manoeuvred alongside and threw lines to us. Small naked boys dived for the coins we threw into the muddy water, and before our eyes stretched the sea front of Alexandria, splendid, brilliantly white, a crescent of tall buildings, domes and minarets. On deck a busy, laughing crowd of soldiers leant over the rail arguing the price of oranges and melons and pulling up baskets of fruit and a succession of leather goods: handbags, suitcases, decorated ‘poufs’. They would not have been so merry if they had known that we were to be there at anchor for eleven days. No one was allowed ashore and except for port officials no one came aboard.

After dinner Ken and I took chairs to the boat deck and sat smoking cigars and looking at the bright lights of the waterfront and the reflections in the water: it was four years since we had seen a city with no ‘blackout’. Now that we were at anchor there seemed to be some prospect of variety and everyone became relaxed and friendly, but not for long. Soon the men began to complain that they had nothing to do and groaned when we said that there would be talks and lectures for them.

‘How long shall we be on the ship? Shall we be put on another ship? Shall we have to spend a long time in a transit camp in Egypt?’ I was given 52 Air Letter Cards for 54 men and came up against the stubborn unwillingness of men to help when they think that they have in some obscure way been cheated,

‘We bin robbed, Sir, look at this. 52 cards for 54 blokes, Sir, - it ain’t fair, Sir.’

It took 10 minutes talking to persuade four men to share two cards; then, to change the subject, I told them that I was going to lecture them on malaria the next day, and that they had better think up by then any questions they wanted to ask about malaria.

We found relief from tedium by teasing the bumboat men. Donald Easton, who was a very serious-minded doctor, would while away hours and days fruitlessly trying to drive bargains with these shrewd and ancient traders. The engineers had other ideas. Maurice would pretend to begin a transaction by leaning out of a porthole and shouting

‘Handbag, Handbag’

Hamish then engaged attention by arguing the price and drawing up the offered handbag on a piece of string; Maurice meanwhile had filled a bucket of water to throw over the lot of them who were in the boat, a climax that provoked angry shouting. When bored with the water game Maurice had a more sophisticated sport; he coiled lengths of instantaneous fuse primed with detonators inside empty cigarette tins and lowered them on fine wire as though lowering money for some purchase already made; when a hand was stretched up to grasp the tin he detonated the fuse with a torch battery, causing a mild but noisy explosion that upset the Arabs.

For days there was no news - only rumour.

‘The dynamos are broken. We can’t move.’

‘We’re all going back to England with the ship for repairs.’

‘We’re staying in the Middle East for the rest of the war.’

Ken and I felt suffocated at night in the cabin so we took our bedding to the boat deck and slept there in comfort, a cool off-shore breeze on our faces and in our hair, the captive balloon hurrying backwards and forwards overhead and the stars of Leo moving slowly across the southern sky. After one night we were told that Officers and Nursing Officers would not in future be allowed on deck after 2130; we stayed below and cursed the girls. Trained as we were for a

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

demanding profession, but with no work and no responsibilities, and seeming to be no nearer the war, the time I spent in Egypt, eleven days on the *Ranchi* and three weeks in a transit camp, were the most miserable I have spent in my life. On one of our last nights in the cabin Len told us how he once heard that you could make a man unconscious by squeezing his chest while he held his breath; he volunteered to be the guinea pig if we liked to try, so we did. He took a big breath and I squeezed. He went out like a snuffed candle. We laid him on the steel floor; he was white as chalk, not breathing, and four nervous doctors stood over him and felt for a pulse that was not there. After what seemed like a very long minute he was all right again but we were still subdued, and trying to explain to one another in scientific terms what we had done.

11th December 1943. At last! We leave the ship tomorrow at 0800 with the draft of 700 men; but first there shall be 'FFI' The Army could not move a man a yard without having a look first to see what he had picked up. We did the FFI. We were then handed £1,000 in notes to change into Egyptian money - piastres - to pay the men.

At a small table in one of the saloons we conducted a pay parade for the first time in our lives,

'Name?'

'Paybook?'

'That's what you're due - all right?'

'Next.' I was baggage officer for the move next day, and saw a certain amount of our colonel; he was a most indecisive man and made the mistake of appealing for sympathy

'You see, I have so much to do!'

No one knew, or was willing to tell us, whether our journey was 20 miles, or 200.

12th December 1943. Breakfast 0700. By 1000 I had counted 12 tin trunks, 16 valises and 18 suitcases into a lighter and said goodbye all round. From the lighter the *Ranchi* looked big, and so did the hole on the port side where the bomb came out. I did not expect ever to see her again.

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Camp 190 at Sidi Bishr was six miles east of Alexandria past King Fouad's private harbour in which the water was a clear and lovely blue. There were a few ramshackle buildings and several rows of tents pitched in straight lines like suburban villas; from the door of each tent two rows of white-painted stones ran in pairs as if they were garden paths to the road that ran through the camp. On each side of the tent doors were red buckets with FIRE painted on them in white. The buckets were half filled with the sand which lay all around and was in our boots, beds, tin trunks and food. When we climbed off the lorries the place suddenly seemed hot and airless. Ken and I shared a tent; it was roomy enough for us to spread our luggage and camp furniture: beds, wash basins and even folding chairs. Date palms gave shade, and the sea shore was less than a hundred yards away; farther out, but within swimming distance, rollers broke gently on a long reef. The officers' mess was in a large tent where every kind of drink was to be had; we were served by Palestinians and Italian POWs. At dinner the first night Ken and I drank sherry, wine from Cyprus, and brandy, and then sat outside in moonlight, smoking and running our fingers through the sand as we talked; the sand was so white that in moonlight it looked like snow. Crickets chirped close by, somewhere a violin wailed and in the distance we could hear the shrieking of native voices; we thought they were saying their prayers.

The few old stagers on the permanent staff of the camp were hungry for the latest news from England. 'What was life there like now? The food? The bombing and the blackout? The Americans? What was life in London like now?' I saw a good deal of the MI (Medical Inspection) room corporal and he told me that he had been four or five years in the Middle East; he was not sure how many and did not much care,

'I'm blunted,' he said, 'I don't care now whether I ever go back home.'

After only a few days the novelty, for the men, of being in Egypt wore off. There was no mail from home, and no news of where we were to go, or when.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

As MOs our days were passed doing small jobs like sick parades and repeated health inspections; we read, waited for meals, and attended parades for PT, for Church (C of E here, R C over there), for route marches and for swimming. I enjoyed taking the men to the beach by the camp. The water was warm, a clear greeny blue, and the sea was never rough. Sometimes I paid out a few piastres for them to go into the local swimming pool, which some of them preferred.

I went into Alexandria one morning with a sergeant-major to change money; the driver of our jeep was a Greek who had not long since escaped from Leros and was full of the gossip of 'Alex': 'four ATS girls were raped just here two nights ago'; 'a couple of RAF men were murdered just over there the other day, walking back to camp after a night out in Alex', and so on. He loved it.

The sea front of Alexandria was spread before us, especially lovely from a slight distance, a white crescent facing the Mediterranean. Most appropriately, I was reading Hypatia at the time.

Ken helped to keep me sane. When he woke in the morning he would look across at me and say,

'There, nothing to look forward to all day,' adding after a bit, 'Oh well, the brightest cloud casts its shadow somewhere.'

We decided to get out of camp as much as possible and one day, after a route march and a swim with the men, the two of us took a tram into Alexandria as far as The Summer Palace. The electric tramway was a convenient way in and out of Alex if you did not mind a crush and did not want to pay for the luxury of a motor car. The tram conductor blew a shrill and plaintive note on a little trumpet to signal to the driver when he wanted to start or stop. After lunch at a restaurant we went to the harbour, and at the water's edge came on an old boat builder who showed us what he was doing. Flat on the sand was a wooden board several feet square made of planks fastened edge to edge; on it had been marked with a sharp tool the shape of every frame of the boat that he was going to build, in effect an architect's drawing of the sections of a boat, the shape of the future hull as seen from bow or stern; it was a typical small Arab felucca. For how many centuries, we wondered, had these simple shapes been handed down like this on templates of wood? Using the marks as guides, the old

man cut the frames out of wide planks with a gigantic fretsaw and set them up on the keel before the final act of planking the boat. We saw one of his finished boats, a beamy craft with attractive lines. He showed us how he smoothed off the curves of the hull with a very sharp adze. He and the two small boys who helped him were as pleased as they were surprised to find two strangers in Army uniform interested in their work. We moved away from the sea and passed through an alley where children were playing hopscotch. Some carpet makers beckoned us over to see what they were doing. They had a simple loom, a wooden frame with strings running vertically; between the strings they knotted short lengths of coloured wool which they trimmed flat with a huge pair of scissors when the pattern was complete. The carpets measured about 4 feet by 12 feet and they asked £160 per carpet. They insisted on our feeling the carpet - 'Wool very good,' they said, and explained that they had got it cheap and dyed it themselves, but we were unmoved. In an open space rows of earthenware pots were drying in the sun; we each bought one because we liked the shape, and there was much laughter and shouting

'Six piastres for two. You American, yes?'

We entered a mosque and were shown round by a caretaker; we made to take off our shoes, but he would not have it, asking only that we take off our caps and avoid walking on prayer mats; we noticed that everyone else in the mosque was wearing shoes. The mosque was new and very white, made of concrete; there were mosaic ceilings and reading desks of a wood like teak inlaid with ivory. We were shown clean lavatories, squatting style, with wash places attached; I did not know why we needed to be shown them but certainly when we compared them with others we saw, then our guide had every reason to be proud. Finally we were conducted up a minaret to its highest storey but one, about 80 feet up a spiral stair. We could see the *Ranchi* in the harbour and the children playing hopscotch below; they looked like ants. I handed the old caretaker my binoculars; he used one eye and grinned, murmuring with delight after I turned them round so that he was looking from the correct end,

'Sweeping the whole horizon,' as Ken said.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

I asked if we might go on to the highest balcony but he shook his head,

‘He shake.’ We finished the day with an evening in the Sergeant’s Mess to which we had been invited, and got back to our tent very late but for some reason cold sober. Ken was Orderly Officer and when he came back after inspecting the guard I asked

‘Everything all right?’

‘They were all inside the guard tent - fast asleep.’

‘You kick up a fuss?’

‘No, I didn’t wake them. The relief will tip ’em the wink when the time comes.’

Every few days one or other of us went down with ‘Gippy tummy’, diarrhoea and vomiting. In addition I had a fever that was classified as FEVER, NYD - ‘not yet diagnosed’. My friends, glad of a diversion from the deadly daily monotony, hovered over me, pooled their knowledge and decided that I must have sand-fly or ‘break-bone’ fever. Brookman came first; he had been a GP for five years, just able to support a sister and nephew on earnings much larger than he was getting now for ‘doing nothing’: he complained to me of his decreasing interest, dulling mind and lack of initiative. Which of us, I wondered, was the patient? Donald Gunn came next and wrote me off as a malingerer but Boyd, middle-aged, another ex- GP, came to my aid and told the gathering that I was on no account to get up. I lay back with relief: I had a headache and my bones really were hurting. Someone went off to see if he could find a thermometer.

The medical specialist on the permanent staff at Alexandria (a major) heard that I was ill and looked in; he wanted to know why so much orange peel was lying about and untidily littering the floor of our tent. I lay on my bed all day hearing the high-pitched wailing voice of our laundry boy as he ran about the camp collecting and delivering washing and plaintively calling out ‘Flyin’ dhobie - washin’’, then breaking off into a weird and sad song in his own language. Our washing was taken each morning by this child and brought back spotless the same day. Egypt was my first sight of what was later called ‘The Third World’ and it made me sad. I felt that no

one should need to whine and plead as these pathetic and to us ridiculous Egyptians did when they were forced to make a living out of the our needs.

I saw more of their life when I was detailed with an MO called Finn to inoculate 1200 coolies against typhus at a Base Supply Depot on the other side of Alexandria. We were taken by truck and started work near a fuel dump on the Alamein road. Some gloomy exile had pencilled on the wall of the wooden hut the lines,

‘Happy the man whose wish and care

‘A few paternal acres bound...’ and so on.

We lunched at an officers’ mess called the Hotel Zephyr; a handful of pale English officers who had only beer and picture magazines to see them through the long day were gazing hopelessly at a very pretty girl that a stranger had brought in for lunch.

Finn and I could not stay; we had to get on with the inoculation of the rest of the 1200 waiting in a huge compound with sheds on either side. They were frightened; before they came to us they squatted in the shade, grinning nervously at each other and gesticulating. When they were driven to us they answered any trace of a smile with an ingratiating look. Our routine was to gesture ‘Roll up your sleeve’, put on a dab of spirit, and say a few Arabic words we had been taught - ‘Not to worry’ ‘Good chap’ ‘Finished now,’ and a useful word ‘Yallah’ that seemed to mean ‘Off you go’. After the jab they worked the inoculated arm violently up and down, and gave a sort of grimacing smile, dreadful to see. They were dirty, pockmarked and covered with scabs and boils. They were in rags and were herded like beasts, driven towards us in groups of 20 by men armed with long whips which they used freely. We were told that the coolies were well paid - 20 piastres (about two shillings) a day. The depot where we did the inoculations was near an abattoir; next door to it was a tannery, with flies and smells. When we came in the morning we passed sheep and cattle being driven along the road towards the abattoir; when we came back in late afternoon we drove past carts piled high with reeking hides on which small boys sat dabbling their toes in blood.

For Egypt that day I felt only disgust.

*

Ken and I stimulated each other; one morning, when I should have preferred to sunbathe lying in the sand he provoked me to climb a date palm. I had wondered how it was done; I found that when the great leaves die and fall a ring an inch or two wide is left round the trunk, and these rings give foothold. Sometimes a short length of rope was used to hold the ankles together or to support the body but I had no rope and long before I reached the ground I had cramp in the muscles of my forearms and nearly had to let go.

Some of the NCOs were good company too. There were several Welsh 'sergeant-dispensers' in our draft, men who had been 'chemists' in civilian life, and I usually found them easier to talk to than Englishmen of the same rank: they were interested in the people and customs of a new country and not just in beer and cycling.

I wanted to see the Pyramids and Ken said that he would come with me. We did not ask for leave because we did not think it would be granted; but to see Cairo would be worth any minor scrape in which we might land ourselves. There was a train from Alexandria that would get us to Cairo by 1300.

At first the journey was over flat, fertile irrigated country; later high ground appeared in the distance, sandy-coloured or bluish from far off, its escarpments brought into sharp relief by sun and shadow; the high lands lay east and west, divided by the deep green of the Nile valley. We went by banana plantations and Government farms; trees were plentiful: orange groves, poplars, palms, willows, and cactus caked with sand or mud; over the treetops we could see the lateen sails of boats gliding slowly along the canals of the delta. We passed towns and villages, small compact groups of buildings made of mud brick; on the flat tops of houses were heaps of dung being dried for fuel; on many of the buildings there were domes and towers and in one village a dovecote.

People squatted idly on the banks of waterways or worked in a leisurely way in the fields. Donkeys hurried along the earth tracks between fields, and we saw strings of camels with their halting stately gait; they seemed to move the two legs on one side before those on the other, always moving the hind leg half a pace behind the fore. At

level crossing gates the camels had sometimes to wait for our train to pass; munching, they gazed with heads high past our carriage windows, a look of disdain. Veiled women in black rode with bent heads on the backs of donkeys while their men walked barefoot, carrying shoes in their hands, only putting them on their feet when riding. One small girl in a ragged black dress, no more than a child, walked two donkeys, her arm round the neck of one, tugging at the halter of the other. We noticed everything because all was new to us. We were like two children let out of school; we were free; laughing delightedly, we must notice all and tell each other about it.

We saw different ways of drawing water for irrigation; it could be dipped out of a canal or from the Nile with a bucket hung on the end of a balanced pole; it could be wound out with a long wooden Archimedes' screw operated by hand, the like of which I had never expected to see outside a textbook of elementary physics; and it could be drawn from wells by oxen: the ox walked round the parapet of a well and turned a long beam geared to a spindle that wound the water bucket from the depths on the end of a rope. The Nile fishermen carried fine white nets hung from poles but we did not see them fish. Many of the birds were new to us: kites, kestrels and other small hawks, kingfishers, egrets, hooded crows, lapwings, woodpeckers and flocks of brilliant black and white birds, in flight very like sandpipers. Our faces were glued to the windows and we ate the bread, hard-boiled eggs and oranges that were for sale on station platforms.

Cairo from a distance was less fine than Alexandria but the streets were spacious and had a more western look; the shops, restaurants, hotels and places of amusement looked modern and more prosperous than those of Alexandria. Betty's brother Robert worked in Cairo at GHQ Middle East and we must have surreptitiously examined each other. I did not at once take to him, being unable on such short acquaintance to make up my mind. He was quicker and more shrewd, for he wrote to his sister to say that I seemed to be someone who did not know where he was going. How right he was! Being stuck in Egypt with no plan for the future and nothing useful to do made me rudderless. I was unsure of myself and had begun already to doubt my readiness to commit myself to something so serious as marriage. Robert was, I think, 'something in intelligence' and to do with Greece,

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

and entertained us to lunch in the luxurious surroundings of his top-floor flat, introducing us to sweet lemons which I have not tasted anywhere else. We said that we should like to see the Pyramids while we were there, a request, I suppose, rather like an American in London saying that he wants to 'Do the Tower'. Robert said that we had better take a taxi to Gizeh. When we had separated ourselves from the crowd of dragomen that surrounded us at Gizeh we found that we could stroll around almost unmolested. The middle pyramid (that of Khefren) retained on the upper part its ancient facing of alabaster and we decided that one day we must return to climb it. We spent most of the afternoon gazing at the Sphinx, the chubby cheeks, famous smile and slightly broken nose.

In the early evening Ken and I met at Shepherd's Hotel and, as it was too early to dine, bought a 'lunch basket' for the railway journey. We fell into conversation on the train with a well-dressed Egyptian of about 30 from Tanta; he was very neatly turned out and his black hair was oily and smooth; to help him express himself he made great use of gesticulations with small, slightly podgy hands. He certainly had plenty to say and probably spoke French, Greek and Arabic as fluently as he spoke English. He said that he had a position in the Ministry of the Interior and presented each of us with a visiting card inscribed in Arabic. Weapons, he said, were hidden everywhere up and down the country and the spread of education would soon make life dangerous for the parasitic upper class which lived on the agricultural peasantry; we gathered that he was all for the spread of education:

'When you say "God wills it" to the uneducated they will do as they are told, but the educated will answer back and say "But God is reasonable".'

He wanted to better the lot of the peasants and to develop resources like sardine fishing and cotton growing. A start, he told us, had been made with cotton, which was being treated and made into clothes in Egypt instead of being exported raw for manufacture in other countries. The sympathies of the peasants, he said, were all with the Russians but the sympathies of the moneyed class were with Germany; we wondered where his lay.

From Sidi Bishr station we had a lift back to camp in a jeep, uneasy because of stories of attacks on soldiers - another airman had been killed.

The last hours of 1943 were noted in proper style only by Hamish Anderson, who found some other Scots somewhere in Alex and came stumbling by the tents at midnight blowing on one of those whistles used by the Alex tram conductors, a noise we all knew; he called wistfully by each tent 'Happy New Year, everybody; Happy New Year, everybody'. At last there was silence broken now and then by a short blast on the whistle and we somehow felt sorry for him because none of us had joined in.

9th January 1944. We were told that next morning we should be moving on, and after dinner we settled down in our tents to censor letters. When I had been through 60 letters my mind was a blank in which there were only stereotyped phrases :- 'Hello, my duck, Here I am again'- 'Sunshine and bathing at Christmas, Ha ha!'- 'The Wogs are twisters'- 'Oh to get back to our little nest!'- 'I hope you go out every evening, Chin up'- 'I hope you never flirt, only go out with girl friends. I am keeping myself for you'- 'Well, I must close now'- 'Well, I have come to the end of the page,' and so on. 'May 1944 pass quickly for both of us' was sad to read, but 'Me mates says I had a good Xmas' was realistic; it was written to his wife by a sergeant-major in middle age.

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My last duty in Egypt as an MO was to stitch up the finger of an Arab who was brought to the MI tent just before we left. He was strong, frightened and hysterical and two orderlies held him down for me to put in local anaesthetic. When I had finished the job the finger still looked messy and bloody, but it was tidier than if I had not been there. As I hurried off to the railway station I heard someone say, 'The Wogs have wonderful healing flesh'; I hoped to God he was right.

I was baggage officer again on the principle that if you've once done a job you'll get it next time a name is wanted for it. First came the order, 'Men will take kitbags on the train with them'. Then 'All kitbags will go in a luggage van at the rear of the train.' The empty

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

train arrived and I could see that its rear was where I expected to see its front. By the time I had mobilised baggage parties and begun to move the kitbags from one end of the train to the other our very agitated colonel had arrived; I expected a rocket for not knowing one end of a train from the other but what I heard, incredulously, was, ‘Evans, what I want to see about is getting a compartment to myself do you understand. I have so much to do - a compartment to myself. You do see, don’t you?’

At Sidi Gabir outside Alexandria the train picked up some Nursing Sisters; they certainly had their minds on comfort: ‘Where are our reserved compartments? For us there are places specially reserved.’ The next stop was at Tanta, a town with a population of half a million. We were there for an hour and when I strolled on the platform I noticed that the engine boiler was heated by an oil and water splash fire, the only one I saw in my life except at the Army School of Hygiene. On the platform a barefoot urchin came up to me and said, ‘Where you go?’ Security minded, I replied, ‘Who knows? and perhaps.’ He grinned, and said with assurance, ‘You go Port Tewfik.’ I ought to have known; this was the East, and our destination was probably known in all the bazaars from Tunis to Bombay, and not of much interest to anyone, either.

At Ben Ha the train left the Cairo line and turned east into the desert. It was night and with a blanket wrapped round me I was warm enough to doze. I woke at intervals and had glimpses of the empty desert by the light of a full moon; at one place in the middle of nowhere we passed a big enclosure lit by many electric lights and surrounded by high barbed-wire fencing. Some time after dawn the train reached the end of the line and came to a stop where a ship was moored to a quay. She was the *City of London* black and small, less than half the size of the *Ranchi*, but she looked like a ship, not a block of flats, which was what the *Ranchi* had sometimes resembled.

Port Tewfik on the Sinai shore of the Gulf of Suez was a barren place; all we saw were the big sheds - ‘Go-downs’ - of a loading point at the edge of the desert. We filed aboard ship and from the deck looked down at coolies waiting on the quay to bring baggage off the train; they wore reddish singlets, dirty ragged shorts, and cloths over their heads.. They reminded me of those I had inoculated at the

Alexandria Base Supply Depot. Herded into groups of about 20, they squatted on the quay, smoking cigarettes; over each group was a man with a long lash. In overall charge of loading cargo was a British engineer sergeant; I told him what baggage we had and he said 'No problem, Sir,' and indicated the coolies. 'They've no minds of their own, Sir. You can do what you like with them.' 'They' carried kitbags from the train and stacked them by the appropriate companion ladders to be taken aboard by our men. Occasionally kitbags went to the wrong place and I had to interfere; as the sergeant had said, you could do what you liked with them; it was horrible. Perhaps they were cowed because 'the overseers' were always there. The custom was that when a ship was alongside, these unfortunates were brought on the quay and waited crouching there until there was a job to do.

The *City of London* had not been completely gutted for trooping and our cabins were snug, with proper bunks and fans, carpets, shelves for books and bedside lights that did not work. Ken and I shared a cabin with Robert Boyd whom I still could not bring myself to call Robert; he was short, plump and almost hairless, and slept a great deal; I sometimes wondered if he suffered from a deficiency of the thyroid gland; he had that look but I never asked him. He was always quietly kind, and was a very good doctor.

The hills of Sinai were arid, wild and bare; a flat-topped plateau fronted the sea and was cut by deep ravines. When we left Port Tewfik the sand of the plateau glowed in the light of the setting sun, the shadows faintly blue and the sky pink. At nightfall the rising moon had a greenish tinge; the sea was quiet and the sky hazy; because the moon was full the stars were not bright. Down below, Ken and I repeated to each other that we were in a boat in the Gulf of Suez travelling south towards the Red Sea: fanciful and absurd notion! It was difficult to adjust to the reality. When we reached the cabin Boyd was in his bunk and asleep, and the fans were turned off.

A Welsh batman called Shaw had been allotted to our cabin, and in the morning he woke us at 0630 to let us know that he was not able to get us any morning tea. We were lucky in the Red Sea to have a fresh southerly wind which countered the heat from which passengers suffer in those waters when the wind is astern. The sea was a deep bright blue dotted with small breaking crests; on the third day out we

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

steamed into a strong wind and heavy swell, and a lot of spray came over the foredeck. Except for some rocky islands we saw no land until we reached Aden, where we anchored out in the bay. The shores at Aden were low except where cliffs guarded the entrance to the bay, but in the background was a range of jagged hills. The day we lay at anchor was cloudless and hot; fragile-looking boats came alongside to trade, and kites, vultures and gulls circled overhead. By the afternoon many of the kites had settled in various attitudes on our foremast - I counted ten together at one time. At evening the eastern hills were a dark bluish brown, the sky was streaked with yellow and the blue of the sea had a green tinge. We were told that water was scarce at Aden: it might rain perhaps once a year, and the longest recorded drought in recent times had lasted five years.

I watched over the ship's side one of the light native boats that came out to us - 'buoyant as a fulmar on the waves'. It was pointed at the ends, high prowed and altogether beautiful on the transparent blue-green sea. It was rigged with one mast and a single lateen sail, and manned by two near naked giants with close curly hair and skins the colour of dark-roasted coffee beans. A big swell ran past our anchored ship; the grey ship's side, the light bubbling foam on the wave crests, and the deeper streaks of green farther out remain in memory; the effortless way the light boat moved and the easy skill of its laughing crew were intoxicating.

"Buy wine of us, you English brig"

There were other sails about, and inshore I saw two big dhows and a three-masted ship at anchor. After we left Aden I went down with 'Gippy tummy', diarrhoea and colicky pains, and Boyd put me on 'Sulfa' drugs and a diet of nothing but iced lime juice. I was not the only sufferer and Boyd himself was quite as ill as I; he knew all about the sudden griping pains and the rush to get to the nearest lavatory in time. When he came into the cabin one day to see how I was, I handed him his webbing belt and said that one of the Commando officers had found it in the lavatory and recognised it as his; he removed the cigarette that always dangled from his lips and said,

'Oh, in the lavatory again, was it.' Next day I gave myself a grain of opium to settle my stomach and went back to bed; I had a series of

wild and improbable dreams which lasted until late afternoon when I rushed on deck, hearing cries of 'Torpedo, torpedo.' Everyone was crowded along the starboard rail, gazing at the approaching torpedo, when it suddenly altered course near the ship and changed into a school of dolphin; they formed up in line ahead before our bows, a beautiful, splashing joyous company.

I made friends with some Merchant Navy officers in the cabin next to ours; they answered my endless questions about how to navigate a ship by the sun and stars, lent me books and taught me enough for me to write a useful account for some future day. Like us, they were only on passage in the *City of London*, but they took me to the bridge and gave me practical lessons on the use of the sextant. Aden was the most southerly point on our route to Bombay and on the night we left I got a sentry to wake me at 0400 to see the Southern Cross. It was easy to find, but so many glorious stars and constellations shone in that southern sky that I was disappointed. The Pole Star was low on the horizon and the Milky Way made a smaller crescent in the sky than I was used to; Fomalhaut, Regulus, Sirius and many more stars were easy to find on those nights; Sirius was like a sparkling jewel and only the planet Jupiter could compare with it. Before I went back to my bunk Venus, brighter than any star or other planet, had risen.

I enjoyed going to the very stem of the ship on fine nights. The strong warm headwind whistled round my ears, and the sea raced past the bows towards the stern, the bow-wave turning over in white breakers and a great glow of phosphorescence. A young soldier joined me; he held up his face to the wind and said,

'Blows the cobwebs away, doesn't it?'

For me it blew away a lot more besides: it blew away doubts and sadnesses; I was very happy up there, and sure of myself. Although I felt alone I knew now what I must do; I must do my job where I was going and put off thinking about any future until I went home.

Ahead of the stem the black water rushed smoothly towards the ship, reflecting the light of a million stars from its not yet broken surface: Kipling's 'planet powdered floors'.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

Large schools of dolphin followed by clouds of sea birds were with us every day after we left Aden; the lascars said 'fish convoy with aeroplanes, Sahib.' We saw flying fish all day; their bodies from above looked black and their fins transparent; they left the water in little groups of about half a dozen, fanning out to left and right in mid-air and gliding near the surface, very fast, for forty yards or more, only occasionally touching the crest of a wave.

Three days before we reached Bombay the ship's MO (Troops) gave us a lecture about life in India; I went to our cabin afterwards and found Ken sitting gloomily on his bunk eating bread and bully beef as fast as he could. Various friends drifted in and it seemed that that MO had cast deep gloom over all of us, chiefly by saying that we were going to be four or five years in the far East. Grosset, newly married, a fair haired, pale and rather silent doctor of whom I did not see much, was very depressed; he sat in a chair with his face in his hands listening to us rehearsing the disappointments and miseries conjured up by the ill-timed talk; at last he silenced us by looking up and saying 'I don't want to know anything about India. I just - don't - want - to - know about it.'

22nd January 1944. Up at 0700 to inspect the men's breakfasts. Venus was rising and in the south east I could see the bright stars of Scorpio; farther west the Southern Cross was still visible, but faint, and near setting. I stayed on deck; there was a haze on the horizon and the sea, calm but for a surface ripple, was green in colour. We came into Bombay soon after noon. Small hilly islands began to show, and clumps of trees; there were porpoises in the muddy water alongside and dozens of kites appeared; the men threw scraps for the kites to catch in mid air and yelled in chorus at each daring swoop and clever catch. We passed 'The Gateway to India' without noticing it and berthed before tea - Mackenzie Pier, Bombay. We set about filling in forms and changing money.

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The climax of the voyage for all of us was to find at last mail from home. For two and a half months we had been cut off from all that home meant to us and if there was anyone who had no letters that day he must have been very lonely. I settled in a corner to go through my

letters slowly, one by one. Wherever I looked men were doing the same, standing motionless in corners or sitting on the deck, going through letter after letter.

In the evening I lay on my bunk with the fans turning; the cabin was unlit, but light came through the open door; portholes were open and on shore there was no blackout; shore lights lit the ship and were reflected in the oily harbour water. A slight breeze blew through the cabin but even when lying there with no clothes the humidity made me sweat. Our draft was split up at Bombay and we were posted as 'general duty officers' to British Military Hospitals all over India. Ken and I were posted together; we were to go to Cawnpore, nearly a thousand miles from Bombay - two days and a night by train. Someone congratulated us and said it was a coveted posting; we never discovered why. Boyd came with us as far as Jhansi where, presumably because he had a Diploma in Public Health, he was posted as a specialist in epidemics, drinking-water and drains; except for chance encounters with Gunn and Dawson I saw no more of the others.



Chapter 6 India and Cawnpore

On the morning after reaching Bombay I was detailed to look after the unloading of our baggage; as dockside cranes lifted nets full of trunks and kitbags off the ship I studied the coolies squatting on the wharf. At first they reminded me of those at Port Tewfik, but there were differences: they looked thinner, and their clothing was different. Each man had a dirty red cotton tunic which reached to the hips, about his loins was a cotton dhoti that had once been white, and on his head was a length of cloth coiled a turban on which he was able to balance any sort of load. He wore a polished brass disc with a number, his licence as a porter. When he ferried baggage he was paid so much for each item; here a kind of free enterprise seemed to take the place of what in Egypt often looked like slavery.

At mid-day Ken and I were taken by truck with five other doctors and several nurses to Victoria Terminus, Bombay's main railway station, and I was suddenly plunged into India. My first impressions were of noise and squalor, of restless movement like that of maggots, human tragedy begging for relief that I could not give; I felt coldly insulated from these human beings. My tin trunk was hoisted on the head of a coolie like one of those I had seen at the dockside; I thought 'What a load for one man to have on his head!' and the next minute saw my bedding roll lifted as well and balanced on top of the tin trunk. The man turned and on spindly legs moved off with bent knees in the direction of our train. Ken and I followed a string of coolies as they pushed their way through the crowd. The station platform was low, like those of Europe, and the coach doors were high above us. Coolies jogged with huge loads in every direction; sellers of sweetmeats called out 'Misri, jelebi, jelebi,' and displayed the sticky, sugary confections on basketware trays. The cry 'Chae, garm chae,' 'Tea, tea, hot tea,'

announced men with urns or aluminium kettles and stacks of small brown earthenware cups; after drinking from a cup you dashed it to the ground. Adding to the general clamour of beggars was the high-pitched call of the cigarette-sellers, 'Pan, biri, cigarette; pan, biri, cigarette'; pan advertised the leaf, betelnut and lime paste for chewing betel, and biri the small rolled green leaf with an acrid smoke used by those unable to afford cigarettes. We had been given our train tickets when we left the ship and someone had reserved places for us in two-berth first-class accommodation (classes ranged from 3rd, wooden and open-plan, through 2nd and Intermediate for Indians and other ranks, to 1st for service officers, European civilians and some Indians). When our luggage had been stowed we climbed up and found a compartment the width of the train with two leather-covered bunks, one above the other, where our bedding had already been unrolled. There was nothing cramped about the compartment and two leather-upholstered fixed chairs for daytime use were a part of the furniture. The doors opened inwards and could be barred against forced entry. The windows had separate shutters of glass, of wire mosquito-netting and, to give shade, of wood slats; the windows also could be barred to prevent entry at night. When we turned to stand in the doorway the coolies had been pushed aside by a crowd of beggars: 'Baksheesh, Sahib, Bara Sahib. No mother, no father, no brother, no sister; baksheesh Sahib. Baksheesh Maharaj; Bara Sahib, baksheesh.' It went on and on, and every kind of mutilation and deformity was offered for our inspection: stumps of arms and legs, blind eyes, festering sores covered with flies, and we could only marvel at the speed with which some of these terrible cripples could cover the ground from one possible source of alms to another.

The train did not start at once and presently over the heads of the crowd we saw an officer's peaked cap worn at a jaunty angle over the lean face and slightly twisted smile of Maurice, liveliest of our engineer friends on the *Ranchi*;

'Maurice, where did you get to? Where are you going? Come in with us. Have you got any gear?'

He had been posted to 'Transportation' and was on his way to Deolali, through which we should pass that evening.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

There was none of the blowing of whistles and slamming of doors to which we were accustomed at home. The Calcutta Mail began its journey silently, smoothly, with less fuss even than the Rome Express leaving the Gare de Lyons except that it had twice as far to go; the chae-wallahs, the coolies still arguing about payment, the vendors of cigarettes and pan, and the sari-clad bent heads of women began to slide past our open door; the upstretched pleading arms and clutching hands fell away and became indistinct in the mass of humanity. We gathered speed as we passed by the shanti-town slums of Bombay and the great marshalling yards of Kalyan and began to climb steeply and continuously about strange bare hills where rocky outcrops and fantastic pinnacles showed through the haze. We passed through tunnels and over viaducts. The air at first was hot and the ground in that dry season looked barren and scrubby. Ken remarked on how suited to a colourless landscape were the brightly coloured clothes of villagers.

We climbed 2000 feet through the Ghats to the plateau of the Great Indian Plain before stopping to change engines from electric to steam. There was time for Ken and me to stroll up the platform to talk to our new engine-driver, a sallow big-built Eurasian with a broad and confident face, prominent cheek-bones and wide mouth. He wore a black beret and dirty white singlet and continuously wiped his hands on an oily rag while the Indian firemen, bare to the waist, flung shovelfuls of coal into the furnace. The driver hardly spoke as he wiped away sweat and looked down on us from the high cab of his enormous locomotive.

As evening came on we saw habitation and animals: groups of thatched huts with mud walls, bullocks with birds perched on their backs. In the background dimly seen ranges of hills encircled us and rock spires towered into the sky; it was not at all what we had expected to see in India. The sun set deep red below streaky clouds; twilight lasted but half an hour and the stars came out with a rush.

Maurice left us at Deolali where we ordered dinner to be served at a station farther along the line. When the train waited at evening at such halts flocks of green parakeets screamed like swifts overhead as they flew at high speed to the trees where they moved and squawked restlessly before roosting. We ate dinner in our compartment and I

then settled on my bunk, wrapped in a blanket, for it was suddenly chilly after nightfall, to read my letters again. Under the influence of the letters I was soon back home and walking the country lanes with Betty when Ken, who had had fewer letters than I, began to complain that I had gone into a trance. I was, he said, 'stretched out on the bunk like a bloody pasha, subconsciously reaching out a hand now and then for a banana from the bunch on the table.' Next day we telegraphed ahead from wayside stations to arrange for meals and at prearranged halts were served with chota hazri or early morning tea and toast, and later with breakfast, lunch, and afternoon tea. The progress of the train was leisurely and the halts might be for half an hour or more, so the eating of the substantial meals that were brought to our door from station restaurants was no problem. Robert Boyd stayed in our compartment for much of the second day but left us at Jhansi which we reached early in the afternoon. We sat all day in the doorway or by open windows on the shaded side of the train, gazing at the passing country and seeing on telegraph wires and in the open a countless variety of colourful birds completely new to us: vultures, kites, drongos, bee-eaters, shrikes of several kinds, rollers; they were beautiful and various in their colouring. I began to think that I might find a lot in India to interest me.

Soon after Jhansi we crossed the Jumna which rises far to the north in the snows beyond Dehra Dun and flows past Delhi and Agra to join the Ganges below Cawnpore. In the dry season the river was not very wide and only the great extent of the girders which spanned the sandy banks on either side showed how big the river must be in the rains. Towards evening on the second day we saw with regret that we were slowing down on the outskirts of a large drab industrial town. At the side of the track ungainly vultures as big as turkeys were busy feeding, plunging bloody heads and necks deep in the carcase of a dead cow. We had reached Cawnpore.

Before the train stopped we were beset by red-smocked coolies who hung on the doors eager to take our luggage; we were again astonished to see how a weedy-looking man swung first a tin trunk and then, with help, a bedding roll onto his head. I stood at the station entrance surrounded by baggage, refusing the offers of Sikh drivers with large taxis to take us wherever we liked, while Ken telephoned

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

the BMH (British Military Hospital) to say that we had arrived. I had been advised about the payment of coolies (Four annas 'per package per trip') but when I had paid out the miserable sums the coolies looked at me and at the small coins in their palms and cried,

'What is this, Sahib? What is this? I am poor man, Sahib.' If there were no outcry, I thought, hardening my heart, it would mean that I had given too much. An Army truck arrived from the hospital and brushing aside the importunate Sikhs we had our baggage lifted in and ourselves climbed up by the driver.

It was dark by the time we left the railway station and drove to the 'British Cantonment' on the outskirts of town; in the headlights we could see tarred roads flanked by broad unmetalled lanes where coolies jogged in the dust and bullocks drew their heavy carts. Trees lined the roads and beyond the trees were bungalows in their own gardens. About us was the sweet heavy smell of the Indian night. At the hospital we were directed to a bungalow in more open country not far from the Ganges. Two RAMC captains, Guggenheim and Heathcote, greeted us and showed us a bedroom that we could share; they lent us their 'bearer' or personal servant to make up beds and wait on us at table until we engaged our own servants.

Guggenheim was a refugee from Nazi Germany and before the war had been in general practice in London. He was large and genial, and when we dined with him that first night he said,

'I suppose you came straight here from Bombay? I did that on my first posting in India two years ago, but there was no need, of course; with an ordinary posting you can spend a week or ten days in Bombay or Cal on the way. Mind you, if it says "Report forthwith" it might be as well to cut that down a bit - say three days.' He had strong views about what he called 'The Old British Regime' in India and gave us a long account of how he had, as he put it, 'settled' his colonel at Kanti, his first posting. I remember only the defiant climax of his tale, 'So I said to him "It may mean court-martial, Sir; but make no mistake; if it does come to that I shall have something to say there."'

The bungalow that Ken and I shared with the other two was spacious; the verandahs were wide and cool and the house stood in open parkland where the trees were always in leaf and gave shade;

there was little grass at that time of year and in most places the ground under the trees was dry bare earth. On our first morning after a leisurely breakfast we walked to the hospital along a road shaded with trees; monkeys sat by the roadside scratching under their arms and we saw 'tree-rats' everywhere, the squirrel-like striped rodents that are an everyday part of the Indian scene. Hoopoes walked on the sparse lawns under tamarind trees. The sun was warm on our backs, at that season not uncomfortably hot even in the middle of the day. At the hospital we were shown over the British wing. A doctor and a sister took us round the almost empty wards and introduced us to the few in-patients, sufferers either from melancholia or from obscure fevers which no one had been able to diagnose. A small isolation ward stood alone and we were taken there to be shown two soldiers with very bad smallpox, rather as we might be taken by the curator of Kew Gardens to see prized shrubs of which he was particularly proud. One of these patients was English and the other a West African negro; we had not seen advanced smallpox before and I never forgot the sight of their purulent sores and extreme illness; nor for some reason did I forget the surprise of seeing that the soles of the negro's feet were pale - I had never before seen a black man in bed.

We spent what was left of the morning finding our way about the cantonment, and visiting the Post Office, the Club and the Station Office. We discovered that in India the simplest kind of shopping demanded the help of a servant. If you wanted stamps, airmail letters, ink, soap, a bicycle - it didn't matter what - the method was always the same, get someone to do it for you. An official at the Post Office explained in English that the only way to remain calm and dignified and yet get things done was by not doing them yourself. Take for example sending a cable, a straightforward business, you might think; to find out what sort of cable was appropriate for your needs (itself no simple matter in India) and to obtain a form on which to write your message, you did not attend the post office in person; you did not join a queue, enter the hurly-burly of an Indian crowd or go near a counter; your bearer did these things. When you had written the cable you handed it to him to take back to the post office for transmission; these things were what a bearer was for - he did them for you while you lay back in a cane chair at the club with a long cool drink. We were not received with much enthusiasm at the Cawnpore Club. We went there

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

for drinks before lunch on a Sunday and stood feeling very much the outsiders, surrounded by a buzz of coded 'station' talk so private that we wondered, not for the last time, if any of these people had any idea what we were in India for, or that the India in which they lived was fighting a war. We left the party as unknown in Cawnpore circles as we had been on arrival.

The ceilings in our bungalow were high and the rooms were cool. A central living-room was shared by all of us. Doorways led from it through half-height swing doors to bedrooms more than big enough for two, and from the bedrooms other openings led to very small bathrooms. Each bathroom, or gusl khana had a concrete floor, a tin bath and a thunder-box or commode. There was a hole at floor level for bath water to run out and snakes to come in, and an outside door for a servant, the sweeper, to come in to take away the pan of the commode. To leave the door open was a signal to the sweeper that he might come to clean up.

For a bungalow such as ours there was a recognised complement of servants; the least that would do for four of us would be two bearers, a waiter, a cook, a water-carrier and a sweeper, or man of the lowest caste who attended to menial work that no one else would touch. Most of the servants were already in post and Ken and I needed only to find a bearer. To advertise the vacancy was easy: we casually mentioned in the hearing of the servants that a second bearer was needed and presently an assortment of men stood before us; each carried in his hand a collection of 'chitties', much-thumbed scraps of paper scribbled over with references, some of them enigmatic, from previous employers. We chose an old white-haired man whom we took to be about 60; his correct age, he told us later, was 59. He was very thin, and stooped badly; his lined brown face, drooping white moustache and fine forehead appealed to us. Jafar Ali was his name and for 50 rupees a month he would act as bearer for Ken and me. Jafar Ali immediately set about ordering our lives and arranged through a local contractor (who had some undisclosed link with the Station Office) to hire bicycles and furniture for us. At four o'clock, as we lounged on long chairs on the verandah, Jafar Ali brought us mugs of tea and pieces of hot buttered toast wrapped in old newspaper. At dusk he appeared again on the verandah like a shadow and

murmured 'What time Master have want bath?' In half an hour 'bath' was ready, with a spare kerosene tin of hot water. The evenings were chilly and after dinner the four of us usually sat talking round the log fire in the living-room, drinking gin or rum.

Jafar Ali made up my bed, taking sheets from my tin trunk and arranging them between the blankets, then slinging a mosquito net from bamboo poles which he fixed to the two ends of my camp bed. At Cawnpore I lay between sheets for the first time since Leeds and slept until dawn when I felt a movement of the mosquito net and saw Jafar Ali peering at me down a tunnel he had made in the blankets to find my face.

'Good morning, Sahib. Tea here.' This life, I thought, is all right, and then remembered some of the dreadful stories Guggenheim had told us the night before of scenes in Calcutta.

Militarily, Cawnpore was an 'Area' commanded by a Brigadier and I was soon given to understand that I was expected to observe certain customs: for example, officers were not, repeat not, to be seen carrying parcels. This, like a host of small things in British India, irritated me. It meant that if I bought a few books in town, I was expected to hire an urchin to carry them wherever I went on foot.

Jafar Ali did my everyday shopping, posted letters, and sent cables if necessary, always charging a small commission on whatever he did, and being scrupulously careful always to explain to me, when presenting the bill, the presence and amount of this item. I liked him.

I was asked by the hospital one day to help with censoring patients' letters and when I had finished I had a dip in the swimming pool at the Club, an open air pool with a springboard at one end. In the afternoon I bought some pastels in Cawnpore bazaar and wished that I had more skill to draw the plaster buildings, the delicate shades of yellow and white and red, and the green of the trees that cast long shadows at morning and evening. As Orderly MO I was called to the hospital that night to sew up the chin of a pleasant young officer from a unit stationed nearby; it turned out that he was engaged to a pretty one among the sisters at the hospital and she came to help me. We then went round to his quarters for a late supper and I slept the night in the CO's room at the hospital under a borrowed mosquito net. There

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

was a map of India on the wall and I was able for the first time to see exactly where Cawnpore was. The Cantonment Church clock struck the night hours; the note was tinny and I felt lonely; the chimes reminded me of sitting working late in an Oxford college. When I cycled back to the bungalow before dawn the air was warm, Venus was clear in the east and I noticed that at one side of the roadway a large eastbound motor convoy had bivouacked on open parkland that was usually deserted. There were covered trucks and small tents everywhere, and cooking fires were being lit.

News of our arrival to live at the bungalow soon got around and a stream of snake charmers, dancers and peddlers began to call on us. When we came in one afternoon Jafar Ali would first give us tea and afterwards signal to one of these visitors lurking behind the bungalow that the moment was right; the peddler would come forward and politely spread his wares at our feet: trinkets, shawls, ivory ware, carpets and so on. The carpet seller came with an assistant who pushed a cart on which the carpets were heaped; it was for the assistant to lift them on our verandah where his master might properly display their quality. Some of the articles were beautiful and some were rubbish; we did not buy much because we could not afford the best, and besides, what would we do with these things, we asked, in the sort of life to which we thought we were going?

The old sweeper was a visitor of a different kind. He belonged of course to the 'untouchables' but he plucked up courage one day to come to tell me that he had a terrible cough, and gave a demonstration of which there was no need because I had heard enough of him about the place. When I had carefully examined his chest I told him that he had bronchitis and he said 'Oh yes, Sahib, and I have asthma too.' Alas, I thought, in this country you are untouchable because you are born that way, not because you are fit for nothing else.

A young English officer of the Indian Army joined us one evening for dinner. He was a guest of Heathcote's and I did not much care for him. He had a habit, harmless enough, of over-using the word 'crow' - 'He's quite a decent crow' or 'There was a frightful crow there', and he had a much worse habit of speaking disparagingly in English about the bearers and the waiter while they, who understood a good deal of English, hovered about us at table. My afternoons were usually free

and I often went into the town on a bicycle. The days were only moderately hot and I cycled slowly through the bazaars doing my best to avoid pedestrians and the holy cows which lay half asleep in the roadways and on the pavements. I only once saw children at play: that was in an open space where a big wooden wheel similar to those sometimes seen in fairs at home had been set up: the children swung from bars of rough wood that hung from the wheel. Most of all I enjoyed watching craftsmen at work in their open-fronted shops, carpenters planing and sawing while the half-finished chair or table stood before the shop, leather-workers sewing by hand with a primitive awl, coppersmiths, tinsmiths; I spent hours standing there, taking in the sounds and smells, sniffing at exotic scents whose origins I did not know. The pavements were splashed with purplish-red betel spit. Indian policemen stood at cross-roads, neatly turned out in shorts, leather belts, short puttees, and boots, smart puggarees on their heads. They carried batons with which they went through the motions of directing traffic after it had passed, half-heartedly waving to cars already distant, approving the event with appropriate signals.

We wore khaki drill: shorts, knee-length 'stocking tops' and, when not formally dressed, heavy sandals known as 'chaplis'. In the bazaar I had a look at several patterns of these and, unable to make up my mind which of two pairs would suit me, asked

'Which is the better pair?'

There was a non-committal shrug of the shoulders and that slight sideways movement of the head, indescribable and unmistakable, which means both assent and 'Just as you please, Sahib'

'Both are better, Sahib.'

I was left to muse, as I cycled home, whether 'better' in this country of ambiguities might also mean 'excellent'; I had already discovered that in the Urdu language *kal* which meant tomorrow, also meant yesterday, and *parson* which was the day after tomorrow, was also the day before yesterday. The bazaars were full of the scent of spices and I liked the warmth of the air and the greenery of the great shady trees at the sides of the road. As I cycled back I saw monkeys sitting by the road in human attitudes: dejected, chin on hand, or half asleep in the heat of the afternoon, head back and hands folded over

belly. On the soft earth that flanked the roads coolies carrying huge loads on their heads went with a peculiar kind of jogging gait, a lurching run, and with them bullock carts drawn by sad looking downtrodden water buffaloes.

Ken and I went one day to a Cantonment sports meeting at which some of the events were competitive and some were a kind of exhibition. The most spectacular of these was by a man who began his 'turn' by spreading a carpet on the ground and sticking a three inch needle in it, point upward. He then did a very steady handstand over the needle, lowered his face to it by slowly bending his elbows and picking up the needle by grasping the point with his eyelids. The day was like a fine warm summer's day in England; above were high white cumulus clouds against blue sky and on the ground before us patches of bright sunlight on bare earth. At the edge of the ground was a row of empty chairs and in front of the chairs a table on which stood a small silver trophy - 'The Cup'. The earth was baked and hard, light brown in colour; only here and there could traces of green grass be seen. At one side was a green copse from which rose a tawdry imitation of an English country church spire; it was made of tin and painted red. Except for the vultures and kites circling above and the fact that the competitors were black and adult instead of being English small boys, the scene would have done perfectly for a Prep School Sports Day. As we cycled home we noticed a number of big griffon vultures alighting in trees by the roadside or strutting on the ground; beautiful in their gliding flight but clumsy and ugly on the ground. Their bare necks projected like snakes from collars of fluffy feathers and on their bald heads were caps of grey fluff. They smelt disgustingly of carrion. Smaller vultures, white in colour and even more ugly, also circled round: Pharaoh's chickens, whose diet is ordure. And there were innumerable other birds, a pleasure to see, kites, the fork-tailed king-crows or drongos, mynas, Indian crows not unlike our jackdaw, woodpeckers with scarlet caps, and blue jays or rollers, beautiful slow-flying apparitions coloured the two blues of Oxford and Cambridge..

Ken now left me, suddenly posted for training in the jungle with a special force, and my days at Cawnpore began to drag.

I saw more of Guggenheim after Ken had gone and he told me something of his own story, insisting, like Ludwig Guttman, that there was something inherently wrong with the German people,

‘They are bullies and cruel in boyhood, formal and militaristic in adult life. I will never go back - Never, Never.’

and when I protested that perhaps the fault lay with the leaders, not the people,

‘Oh yes, perhaps they are badly led as you say, but they are weak to be so easily led.’

We argued about the world after the war; he favoured an international police force for the future and painted a glowing picture of his ideal, a powerful standing army that would be independent of any one nation. I thought it would never work.

On warm evenings we played chess on the verandah. Steps led down to the patches of grass before the house and on each side of the steps cream-coloured stucco pillars supported the roof. Guggenheim had an elegant ivory chess-set with elephants for castles, camels for bishops and individually carved foot soldiers for pawns; envious of his skill, I would grumble that having lovely chessmen carved from single pieces of ivory did not make anyone play better,

‘Of course not, but I beat you just the same.’

We talked about India, about the (as he put it) ‘detestable’ well-to-do classes and ‘the others’. He said to me ‘When I first came to India I had a queer irrational sympathy with the Indians, but now I hate them...I hate them.’ He said it with an emotional intensity which I had never heard except on an actor’s lips, a very good actor playing Shylock: ‘I hate him for he is a Christian.’

One morning we went out early to walk to the Ganges, which was not far from the bungalow, and Guggenheim brought a 12-bore shotgun because there might be wild geese flying to some sandbanks out in the river. Even in the dry season the river was vast, brown, relentlessly flowing. Terns and pied kingfishers hovered over it, small turtles showed their heads and backs in it, and were quick to dive out of sight when they saw us. Sepoys from a transport company had

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

brought bullocks to be washed in the river; after a scrub in the shallows they pushed them into the water where it was deep and let them scramble out where the bank shelved; Indian Army transport bullocks were quite different from the miserable bullocks we saw all over Cawnpore; these were big, powerful animals, well cared for, sleek and well fed. A colonel friend of Guggenheim's joined us with a gun and the two of them hired a boat and were paddled to a sandbank while I took a stroll along the riverside. Upstream the river stretched to where I could see faintly the outlines of a railway bridge at least a mile long. I was standing where the river turns slightly left towards the southeast; the banks were well above water, perhaps 15 feet high, except at one place where a rough track led down to the water's edge. Not much imagination was needed to conclude that I was not far from the place where in 1857 the survivors of a siege in the open at Cawnpore had embarked with the assurance of a safe conduct down river; they had been mown down by fire from the river bank directly they climbed into the boats. The women and children that survived were imprisoned in the The Bibighar by the Nana Sahib and later cut to pieces in their prison house by the worst of his men; the bodies were thrown into a well which was afterwards made into a memorial garden where no Indian was allowed. I had learnt the story at school and on one of my cycle outings I went to see the memorial. The well was there and the iron railings; the gate into The Memorial Park was padlocked. To be at the scene of those terrible events made them come to life as no history lesson had done, and before I left Cawnpore I questioned Jafar Ali about the Mutiny. His father, he said, had been one of General Havelock's bearers and he himself had heard an account by an eyewitness of the shooting down of the three boatloads of fugitives on the river, and of the casting of the bodies from The Bibighar into the well. Jafar Ali was 59 years old and his claims were not impossible.

I attended the Cawnpore Cycle Gymkhana as Orderly MO. The occasion was more than ever like Sports Day at a Prep School, and those present were divided into first and second class citizens. There were army officers' and civilians' wives and some very red-faced men with large paunches; the men wore a flat sort of topi, white shirts and shorts that reached their knees; they carried megaphones and starting pistols, and let off fireworks in between directing the proceedings. All

the competitors this time except two were white and overweight, and all the manual work like shifting seats was done by Indian sepoy who, whatever they did, were shouted at. I wandered amongst the various groups but spent most of my time with two BOR (British Other Rank) orderlies from the hospital who were there to help me; they came from Essex and thought there was no country like England. I sketched some of the onlookers and soon gathered an audience of Indian and Anglo-Indian children. The Drum and Pipe Band of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers lent a bit of tone to the day; they were smartly dressed and spotlessly turned out and contrasted favourably with the spectators.

When he had been away a few days Ken came back for the evening and we sat round the fire in the bungalow. He was at a camp somewhere in jungle country and told us that he had 'No one to talk to, not properly'. I felt for my part that I was stuck at Cawnpore for good: every time I was given a job which could be looked on as possibly permanent I became angrily frustrated. Ken came again a few days later and stayed the night; he told us then that he was moving away for good, and months later I had from him a package wrapped in oilskin in which was a letter telling me that he was somewhere in Burma with a 'Long Range Penetration Group'.

I cycled out of Cawnpore one day on the Lucknow road to where a great banyan tree on the bank of the Ganges made a comfortable seat. I began to draw pictures of donkeys until some Indians gathered round, when I sketched them instead, and gave amusement to the ones who were not being sketched. I had to stop at last because enormous raindrops began to fall and I thought I was in for a soaking. I gave away the drawings to whoever wanted them. I liked those men, they were simple and friendly. One old fellow posed with a half-smoked cigarette carefully arranged to dangle from his lips.

On the 8th February I was called to the Commandant's office and told that I was posted to No.7 Indian Malaria Forward Treatment Unit (7 IMFTU) which was being raised at Lucknow; I was to go to Lucknow next day. I went to the Station Office to draw money. A choleric lieutenant colonel wearing a Scots bonnet was carrying on a one-sided conversation with the Station Staff Officer, completely oblivious of the presence of other people in the room,

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

‘What I want to do is to persuade him, do you see?

What I want is to persuade him; d’you see what I mean?

I want to persuade him.’

The SSO, a young man with an enormous nose and no chin, was twirling a ginger moustache and trying to keep in step with the speaker who was restlessly hurrying up and down behind a long counter. The room was filled with Anglo-Indian girls in the uniform of Women’s Army Corps (India) or WACI), bustling girls with pieces of paper clutched to their bosoms; they had raven black hair and skirts very tight about their behinds. One of them cashed a cheque for me and I went to the Club for a last swim in the pool; the water was cool and sparkling, the garden freshly green and the roses abundant and lovely. At the hospital was a bill from the Contractor; he must have heard of my posting. The statement was clear and wasted no words - a model. I have it still.

J ANAND

To: Rs As

1 Cycle hire one week 2 8 0

1 dressing table 2 8 0

one almark hanging 2 0 0

1 towel stand 0 4 0

1 tub 0 8 0

1 piss pot 0 4 0

Total 8 0 0

I went to see Mr Anand and after a bit of haggling we agreed that I should pay Rs.3 - 10 - 0

In the morning, when I had only to pack, I was called again to the telephone and told that another posting had come through for me - to the BMH at Chakrata, a small station in the foothills near Mussoorie. I rang up Area Headquarters and told them that I had two postings now - ‘Which was it to be?’ They decided on 7 IMFTU at Lucknow

and so determined my life for the next year. At the time I regretted Chakrata mildly for I imagined views of the snows and perhaps access to the mountains, but later I was glad that I did not go there; it would have been a dead end, caring for convalescents and very far from the war. I looked in at the BMH to say 'Goodbye' to the sister on the British ward, gave an anaesthetic for some minor operation because there was no one else to do it, and made for the railway station.

When I first reached India I felt, as many others did, instant sympathy with Indians and some disgust at the overbearing attitude of my own countrymen; the feeling of sympathy gradually gave way to irritation with things Indian and admiration for all that the British had accomplished during their time there.

I left Cawnpore without regret. As my train crossed the long bridge over the Ganges I wondered what on earth an IMFTU was.



Chapter 7 Lucknow

The journey to Lucknow was short, about 50 miles. I was not expected, so there was no one to meet me and from the station I took a tonga which was standing outside in the road. A Tonga was a two-wheeled trap drawn by one horse; the main seat lay across the tonga behind the point of balance of its two wheels and the driver sat in front, sometimes on one of the shafts. The main seat was wide enough for two passengers; a small awning gave shade.

When my trunk was hoisted onto the footrest behind the main seat the shafts rose off the horse's back and pointed in the air. My bed-roll was then hoisted to the driver's seat and partly restored the balance, but when I got in and sat on the main seat we were back where we had been and the shafts were once again in the air. The Tonga wallah or driver seated himself well forward on one of the shafts as though to improve our trim, but he was a skeleton of a man and it would not have mattered much where he sat. He looked round at me to find out where we were going and I said 'Kitchener Lines'.

Tonga horses were among the many miserable and distressing sights of an Indian street, emaciated, covered with sores and looking as if they had barely the strength to stand. My driver gave his horse a sharp flick of the whip and we trotted off. The hours that followed might have seemed funny to an onlooker but I very soon ceased to laugh. I was in that tonga looking for Kitchener Lines for two and a half hours, after which it was dark. The tonga man could speak no English, I could speak no Urdu and neither of us knew where we wanted to go. I began to think that Kitchener Lines did not exist. The general public did not know of Kitchener Lines any more than we did but insisted with great enthusiasm on directing us. In desperation I at last told the driver to return to the station from where I was able to

telephone 7 IMFTU for a truck. It was so long coming that before it arrived I had a meal of ham and eggs twice over at the station restaurant.

The camp was by a derelict wooded garden on the outskirts of Lucknow, beyond the La Martinière School, the original of 'St Xavier's' where Kipling's Lama arranged for Kim in the book to have his formal education. At Kitchener Lines we shared 180-pounder tents, about eight feet square; the earth under the tents was dug down to a depth of 18 ins. to give headroom, and the tent poles stood on upturned oil drums; the extra height made the tent cool and made it possible to hang mosquito nets over our camp beds. 'The Mess' where we ate was a shelter with a tiled roof but no walls, home for uncounted mosquitoes and flies, and for the small grey lizards that scampered upside down all over the ceiling; the Mess 'Ante-room' was a marquee tent about 20 feet square furnished with a carpet, easy chairs, low tables, a few rugs, and a gramophone; a cupboard and trestle table served as a bar.

Donaldson (Don), a doctor from Manchester, greeted me and introduced me to the CO Lieut Colonel Wakeford who was a tall, fair-haired Rhodesian with the build and carriage of an athlete; he had the ribbon of the North African campaign with a 'mention'. He introduced me to the others in the Ante-room: a Canadian with whom I was to share a tent, Wallace Parke the 'Medical Specialist', several Indian doctors (including a Sikh, a South Indian called Kurup, a Bengali and a Punjabi) and Terry, a sallow young man in the IAMC (Indian Army Medical Corps) whom at first I took to be Welsh because of his sing-song Anglo-Indian voice. In all innocence I asked him where in Wales he came from, an unhappy mistake because he was very sensitive about his Eurasian blood. There were also in the tent two ex-regular soldiers who had risen from the ranks and had administrative jobs: McKeown the quartermaster, known as Mac, very Irish and hot tempered, and Bill Gleed who had been a sergeant major in the Gloucestershire Regiment and was called Registrar, a post in some ways like that of adjutant. Altogether they were a friendly lot and I felt at home. John Wakeford was a reserved man and kept himself a little apart, and I knew from the first minute that there was no question about whom in that room was most liked and respected.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

For the first time in the army I had a sense of belonging, of being one of a unit that was going somewhere with a purpose.

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The IMFTUs

In the dark jungles of the mountain frontier between India and Burma during 1943 and 1944 about one man in five was away from his unit at any one time because of sickness; a company commander who nominally could expect to call on more than 200 men would find in those conditions that 40 might not be there. When the casualty returns of XIVth Army for those years were studied it was found that nine out of every ten casualties were due not to Japanese bullets but to sickness, and the chief sickness then was malaria. There were other sicknesses of course, like typhus and dysentery, but none ravaged the troops and reduced their numbers as malaria did; and one reason for the absenteeism caused by malaria was the slowness of travel: although it might not take more than three weeks to treat a man for malaria it might take months to return him to his unit. If an infantryman, say, was sent back to a Field Ambulance because of malaria, he might at first be as unfit for duty as if he had a gunshot wound, but he would make a quick recovery. Unfortunately, by the time he recovered he would often have been evacuated to the rear to clear the Field Ambulance for other casualties; he would have been taken back over congested mountain tracks to a Casualty Clearing Station, and might perhaps have gone even farther by rail to a General Hospital. In that time, which might be a month or more, he would have recovered completely and be fit to rejoin his platoon.

By this time he could be two hundred miles from his unit, separated by communications that were primitive and congested; first a single-track narrow-gauge railway running through thick jungle, then a precipitous mountain road whose very existence was a miracle in those steep mountains covered with rain forest. That rail and road were the supply line of an army, and space for forward travel was at a premium. The soldier with malaria was therefore often lost to his platoon for two months and more instead of for three weeks.

So the MFTU was born, 'Malaria Forward Treatment Unit'. It could be set up near the front, at Divisional or even Brigade level like

a Field quick time. The patients lay on rows of stretchers in tents accommodating about 50 men and were treated with Quinine, Mepacrine and Pamaquin for two to three weeks, after which they went to another camp to get fit. The MFTU's were called 'Indian' because they were 'Indian Army' units and had a mixed staff, more Indian than British, for we treated all troops of XIVth Army. Our IMFTU was No.7; No.5 was also being raised at Lucknow, somewhere near us. I saw a good deal of it later, but almost nothing of any other IMFTU.

*

I stood by the tent enjoying the warm night. There was a full moon and somewhere the insistent beating of a drum. I could hear crickets and cicadas. Mosquitoes were everywhere and I was careful to tuck in my net when I got into bed. I did not hear my companion, the Canadian, come into the tent but he was there in the morning. A servant brought early tea and when I lifted the corner of my net to reach for the mug I could see that the net on the other bed was twitching. After a while a hand came out, groped on a shelf at the head of the bed for a bottle of Carew's gin and unsteadily slopped some into an enamel mug. He helped himself once more before coming out to shave and deal with another day.

Not long afterward I took a weekend off to visit Guggenheim and Heathcote at Cawnpore and when I returned the Canadian had gone. I heard later that he was in hospital. Mukerji, who took his place, was a small, dark, opinionated Bengali with whom in the Mess we had long arguments on medical matters. I was unlucky in my tent companions for after some weeks he began to show signs of mental disturbance and was also replaced.

After rising and shaving by the light of a hurricane lamp I put on shorts and a khaki woollen pullover (it was February) and joined everyone for PT in the cool of dawn. The drill was done on 'The Parade Ground', an old cricket pitch where there was hardly any grass. Terry and I then usually went together to the Mess for breakfast. The tablecloth was already crawling with flies and each of us had a light wire fly-swat by his plate. The CO generally joined us at breakfast and might talk about how the training programme was going and tell

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

us of any particular jobs he wanted us to do that day. It was characteristic of him that on leaving the Mess he took out a flat silver cigarette case, extracted one particular cigarette with great deliberation and carefully tapped the end before lighting it; he then marched away, leather-bound cane firmly under his arm and broad, flat-rimmed terai hat with handsome puggaree squarely on his head. Terry and I were left to look at the flies that crawled on our soiled tablecloth. We set to work with the fly-swats; the greatest number that either of us killed at one stroke was 18.

The mornings at 7 IMFTU were given over to training. Don and I taught the British orderlies and Terry and the Indian doctors taught the sepoys. The British orderlies had done courses somewhere else on the work of Military Hospitals and Field Ambulances but most of the sepoys, after being given a uniform and being taught to salute and march, had come straight to us from the recruiting Depots. They were young and very like friendly children and I enjoyed their company. Sepoys had their own NCOs and VCOs (Viceroy Commissioned Officers). The NCOs (Havildar and Naik) corresponded to our Sergeant and Corporal, but the VCO was a kind of officer unique to the Indian Army, having no exact equivalent in the British Army; he would fit in perhaps somewhere between a junior Warrant Officer and a Subaltern, and there were some who rose to positions very like that of a Regimental Sergeant Major. There were three grades of VCO: Jemadar, Subedar and Subedar Major, and all were addressed 'Sahib' - for example, 'Jemadar Sahib'.

The IMFTUs had no IOR (Indian Other Rank) senior to Jemadar and no BOR (British Other Rank) as senior as RSM.

After lunch at 1230 I would have a nap in my tent (and perhaps another if there was nothing much happening); then I worked at Urdu grammar to be ready for the main event of my day - an Urdu lesson from 1700 to 1800 with a munshi, or teacher whom I had hired.

At dusk I had a bath in a canvas tub in my tent, hot water being brought in a tin with a wire handle. Then there was always a long gap from 1830 until dinner at 2000. I filled the gap by reading, writing letters, or talking over drinks in the Ante-room. After dinner I might smoke a cigar, stroll over 'The Parade Ground', look at whatever stars

were visible and notice how low the Pole Star was. When I had got to know the senior VCO, Jemadar Nur Mahomet, he might join me after dark and tell me the names of the stars: the Pole Star, for example, was Q'tub Sattar.

- 'When Mahommedan want pray, and no musjid (mosque) is, he turn right shoulder to Q'tub Sattar.'

We went on route marches in the surrounding country, which was flat and dotted with villages hidden in clumps of trees. The Ganges Plain was 'the biggest plain in the world'; there was no limit to it, no end; as the weeks passed and the days and nights grew hot we felt that we should never leave this plain; the sun rose and set on the plain day after day; its huge beauty was the beauty only of dawn and dusk, sunrise and sunset. In between sunrise and sunset there was no beauty, only the vast bowl of blue and the heat that pressed down on us and drained us of energy.

The vegetation was a mixture of meagre cultivation, sparse scrub jungle, long grass, thorn and trees. Distant clumps of trees beyond the dry, infertile foreground made us expect that 'over there' we should find lush pasture, but though we might walk ten miles and more we never did reach lush pasture because there was none; all the same I was never able to stop myself saying 'Over there it looks fresh and green'. In the heat of the day we joined villagers crouching in shade under the mango trees and banyans. Their huts were made of mud-brick and thatch. The ground was hard dry earth. The poverty was appalling. The holy cow was everywhere.

I enjoyed the route marches. I walked at the back of the column with Jemadar Nur Mahomet, a well built man in his thirties; he had good features, a strong face, and a magnificent black moustache which he liked to stroke. At that time, before we moved to Assam and Burma, he dressed like the rest of us in khaki drill shorts, socks, short puttees and 'stocking-tops', the standard wear of the army in India. Stocking-tops seemed odd to me at first; they reached from ankle to knee and were neatly turned down over a garter with a showy green tab; they were also called 'Hose-tops' and they let a man change his sweaty socks often, without needing a big supply of full length stockings.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

The BORs (British Other Ranks) wore side-caps or Australian style ‘bush hats’ on their heads, and the IORs (Indian Other Ranks) a floppy, rather ugly sort of beret; Nur Mahomet, who was vain, had a wonderfully smart felt hat of double thickness like Gurkhas wore; it was called a ‘double terai’ and he adorned it with peacock’s feathers. I wore an ordinary peaked cap.

We marched across small fields of dry earth separated by low earth walls called bunds. Cotton or pulse grew sparsely there, and at that season very little else, but birds, including peacock, were plentiful.

I had already decided that I must learn Urdu, the lingua franca of the Indian Army; I had bought an Urdu book at the bazaar in Lucknow and as mentioned earlier had arranged for a teacher or munshi to come out to the camp to spend an hour a day teaching me. As I walked with Nur Mahomet he gave me language classes of his own; I found it hard going at first because he had very little English and I had not got very far with the munshi. As we went along Nur Mahomet pointed to birds and beasts and plants, and told me their names in Urdu:

‘That is tree, Sahib.’ ‘That tree is mango tree, Sahib.’

‘That tree is orange tree, Sahib.’ Progress was painfully slow but I wrote everything down there and then in a phonetic script of my own; I also made a point of exercising on Nur Mahomet each new bit of grammar as I learnt it from the munshi.

Nur Mahomet used a word *janwar* which puzzled me and shows the sort of question and answer method to which I had to resort. He said one day, pointing as usual,

‘That *janwar* is Blue Jay, Sahib,’ using the Urdu words, and I jumped to the conclusion that ‘*janwar*’ meant bird, until he pointed to some buffaloes we passed and said,

‘Those are going-along fellow *janwar*.’

Something was wrong and after puzzling over what it might be I tried a question which my small vocabulary allowed:

‘*Jemadar Sahib*, is a ‘fish’ a swimming fellow *janwar*?’

Oh yes, it was, and my guess was right - janwar must mean 'animal' or 'creature'.

Over a period of weeks I gradually built up my knowledge until a great day came when, doing some job in my tent, I wanted a screwdriver and without thinking called to a passing sepoy to bring me one from the stores. How wonderful! I had used the language and it had worked! I still remember the moment and the place.

On route marches we often halted for shade in mango groves. The men sat on the ground in a circle and clapped rhythmically while one of them stood in the centre to dance and sing. I lay on my back on the sandy soil, listening. Looking up through the dark green leaves I could see clear sky where vultures circled, and the screaming kites. The birds gave depth and perspective to the limitless blue, and as I looked I could see layer above layer of the soaring birds, fewer and smaller until they disappeared beyond the range of my sight. I was always sweaty, hot and tired when we got home but I always had more Urdu words to remember and felt that I was getting closer to the IORs with whom I could now exchange simple sentences in what passed for their own language.

As the weeks went by and the temperature by day climbed higher I found the heat oppressive and after lunch would often lie on my bed, trying not to listen to what the ornithologist Whistler called the infinitely wearisome cry of the Brain-fever bird from a tree near the tent. Whistler wrote: 'It resembles the words, brain-fever, brain-fever, uttered again and again in loud crescendo tones, each repetition higher in the scale; ...another rendering is Oh, lor, Oh, lor, How very hot it's getting - we feel it, we feel it, WE FEEL IT.'

The Golden Oriole was common in the deserted gardens near our camp; the bird's plumage had a bright metallic glint like that of yellow gold freshly scratched. By our tents Indian crows stalked with mouths wide open, parties of babblers scratched under the bushes, and mynahs and the black and white Magpie robin were common.

One evening as the sun crept down the sky and the welcome shadows touched our tents I heard a soft 'Hello' from Kurup's tent and found him sitting with another doctor, Sharma, fanning himself and saying 'It is so hot! Oh my Gawd'; shyly they invited me to join them

and I began to ask about Indian customs. Kurup had the very black skin of the Dravidian; he came from Madras Presidency, from the Malabar coast, and spoke Malayalam which sounded to my unaccustomed ear like ‘Gobble gobble gobble’. He was fat, jovial and friendly. Sharma was badly pockmarked; he came originally from Agra and his skin was light brown in colour. He was an older man and for 25 years had lived in Rangoon and practised medicine there. Between them, they gave me a lecture on ‘purdah’ which, they said, had been no part of Hindu orthodoxy but came in with the invasion of India by Islam; this, they said, was why purdah was strict in the north and lax in the south. Kurup’s wife could go unveiled in the streets but Sharma’s might not converse even at home with his brother except through a veil. Later, when he had been transferred to Cawnpore, I visited Sharma in the hospital bungalow where he lived; all I saw of his women folk was the occasional glint of a silver bangle and the swirl of drapery at the end of a corridor from which I heard giggles and feminine laughter.

In response to their friendly questions I told them that my mother was a widow and I an only child, information which threw the two of them into fits of helpless laughter which made them choke.

Kurup explained:

‘My mother’ he said ‘she has wept bitterly when I have left to join the army even in India; but you, 6,000 miles you have come. Oh, my Gawd, what to do! What to do!’ The Mother, they told me, ‘She is revered above all - next to God.’ ‘The wife?’ I asked. ‘She is secondary, Oh, very secondary.’ I could not make them see how we looked at things.

The occasional peculiarities of Kurup’s English did not bother him and to me they only endeared him. ‘Most’ and ‘Very much’ were all the same to him and he would say ‘Children - they like me most, and of an Irish friend he said ‘He used to like me most.’ When I told him that the CO of a neighbouring unit, not liked by either of us, had ticked me off for wearing no belt with my bush shirt, he said ‘Oh, he is Ruffian - Army officer, all he live for is eat, drink, fuck and die. Is it not so?’ Later, when we had moved to a place near the Burma border,

and were talking about religions, he dismissed the subject with ‘Oh, in Forward Area all man is God fearing, is it not?’

He invited me to stay with him after the war in the Malabar States - ‘I will introduce you to Gandhi-ji.’ I never knew if he had any special access to Gandhi but such a difficulty would not have occurred to him for a moment when issuing the invitation: the Grand Notion, the Splendid Idea was all, and the practicalities nothing. It was the same when I asked him to come with me to Cawnpore for a weekend; he was delighted: ‘Oh yes, and we will go on to Benares and I will visit the shrines, and you will visit them with me.’

‘OK. Which way is Benares?’

‘Oh, it is the other way.’

‘Then we can’t do it.’

‘Yes, we can’t do it; and also,’ he smiled broadly, ‘I do not have the weekend off.’

But it was a lovely idea.

That kind of indulgence in pleasant fantasy, which meant no more than thinking that it would be fun to go, must have made many Englishmen think Indians deceitful. To a Welshman perhaps it was easier to understand.

Terry liked to tease him,

‘Kurup, what is Agra famous for?’

‘I give up.’

‘It is famous for seven things,’ ticking them off on his fingers, ‘First, Dirt’. Kurup would then roll on the ground in uncontrollable laughter and the conversation was over. I may have been entertained by Kurup, but I was often irritated by Terry the Eurasian:

‘No, Good Heavens, man! Don’t reach for the sugar, make the boy bring it. The subtleties of language which I met with as time went on appealed to me; for example, the distinction between ways of understanding the verb ‘to break’. If I ordered someone deliberately to break, say, a twig to use as kindling I would use one word for

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

‘break’, but if my bearer came to confess that he had broken my only paintbrush he would not use that word but a phrase indicating that my paintbrush had ‘gone broken’ as though delicately to hint that it was not through any human agency that the thing had happened.

Capt Donaldson (Don), was an olive skinned man with a Jewish cast of feature. He came from Manchester and had a catholic interest in music, ranging from Bach cantatas to Vera Lynn; the gramophone and the records in the mess were his and he needed a speculative investor’s ingenuity and a knowledge of all the storage places in the unit transport to take with him all his comforts when the unit was on the move. Don, with the rank of captain, had already been two years in India and become a bit of ‘an old hand’. In 1943 he had been in one of the unsuccessful Arakan campaigns and in the weeks to come we were to hear many times from Don that no conditions we were called on to endure could measure up to those at a place called Buthidaung or another called Maungdaw for humid heat, jungle, insects and the terror of approaching and encircling Japs. When he ran out of steam we restarted him by asking for the story of a medical unit massacred by the Japs beyond the mysterious ‘Tunnels’. It had been overrun by Japanese in the IV Corps ‘Admin Box’ and ‘Doctors, orderlies, and patients all had their throats cut’. When Don’s stories were more than we could bear we asked if he had been the sole survivor who hid in the jungle and got away to tell the tale.

It was a happy Mess and we got to know each other with the help of the gramophone, a few packs of cards and as many bottles of gin and rum as we cared to buy. Don was an artist with the cards and, if you let him near the pack, could tell you what card was in your hand before you picked it up. John Wakeford looked quietly on at our growing friendships, supplying his own leaven of stories from the African bush: there was a man who made a habit of seizing snakes by the tail and breaking their necks as you crack a whip, and another who shot snakes with a rifle and claimed that aiming a little to one side made no difference because a snake always put its head in the path of the bullet.

Snake charmers came often to the lines. They played a pipe which made a characteristic kind of humming sound not unlike a bagpipe. They kept the snakes in flat wickerwork baskets. The charmer sat

before the basket, lifted off the lid, tapped the ground sharply and began to play; the snake rose up to face him and swayed with him from side to side. That was all there was to snake 'charming' except that now and then the charmer twined a snake, usually a kind of python, about his neck, and yours. Snakes are supposed to be deaf and to follow the man's movements by eye, the music charming only the bystander; they are sensitive to vibration and the first rearing up of the head and neck is produced by the tap on the ground; according to hearsay these cobras all had their fangs drawn.

I saw only two snakes in the wild at Lucknow, one a thick stumpy black snake disappearing into a hole in the ground, and the other a thin green snake in a tree.

We were told that the annual mortality in India from snakebite was huge and all hospitals and clinics displayed charts which showed how to identify the various kinds - after catching them! Cobras strike downwards from a height of about 18 ins and the fatal marks are generally found on bare feet and ankles. We were advised always to wear boots and puttees, especially after dark. It was said that, because the strike is downwards, it was safe to put a hand in one of these flat baskets full of cobras whether they had fangs or not; we did not have the courage.

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Lucknow was a pleasanter and more interesting town than Cawnpore; it was a centre of provincial government, and had a university and a medical school. I often took a tonga into town with Terry to look for books or visit coffee shops which he remembered from his time as a student at Lucknow Medical School. On some evenings we would go in with Don and Mac to visit a cinema or bar. 'Vice' in various forms may have been available but Lucknow did not present it aggressively and I don't think any of us was that way inclined at the time.

Going in with Terry in a borrowed army truck one day we had a minor accident. Terry and I carried the victim, who was not seriously hurt, into a dispensary near by and drove on; no doubt someone must make a report to 'the military' one day, but I wondered where else in the world you could damage a few bullock carts in a main street,

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

knock down a man, collect a small crowd and then clear off without as much as leaving your name.

I afterwards counted myself lucky that by chance my only postings in India were to two places known to me by stories of what happened there during the Indian Mutiny. Except for Delhi, which I was able to visit several times later in life, no places were more tragically connected with that uprising, or more able to rouse interest, than Cawnpore and Lucknow.

Terry and I hired bicycles to visit the old Residency on the bank of the Gumti, where the Union Flag still flew day and night as it had flown since the siege of Lucknow in 1857. It was a curiously vivid encounter with the past: the flag, the old buildings bearing marks of cannonshot, the old guns with the name SHANNON, and my finding by the Gumti a tomb with the inscription

GARVEY

Acting Mate

HMS SHANNON

died 1858.

The Residency and the remains of several houses were on a slight rise; the lawns were watered and mown and the flower beds were cared for; banyan trees gave shade and sheltered the monkeys that clambered about the ruins; the bougainvillea was so bright that the colour seemed to be thrust at me. I went over Johannes' house, the La Martinière boys' post, the cellars where the women lived for protection against shelling and the room where, during the siege, Sir Henry Lawrence had died of wounds. I went back there several times, usually alone, and in the end had seen all the fortifications and spent a great deal of time wandering all over the site. There were never any Indians about.

The atmosphere of the Residency was overpowering; as a romantic newcomer to India I could very easily conjure up a frightening feeling of being isolated in a great hostile land, of the murdering masses of Oudh and Bihar all around, of fellow-countrymen at Cawnpore slaughtered, of succour impossibly distant at

Calcutta or wherever it was, while at my feet the Gumti flowing to join the Ganges forty miles downstream was the only link with help - news in those days could only be sent by hand or heliograph. The relics - the buildings, the guns, the fluttering Union Flag gave me also an unexpected feeling of pride, a sense that the people who fought here had a link with a part of my past. And mixed with my unease was another feeling - that I must one day come back to this beautiful and hateful land, back to the heat, the great trees, the dusty parched earth and grass, the patches of brilliantly coloured flowers, the tree rats and the mynahs.

During 1943-4 the British were not popular in India and Terry had told me that there was still a lot of ill feeling about the Lucknow siege in this part of India; Gandhi was under house arrest, and Nehru and other prominent members of the Congress party were in gaol; we were warned not to venture alone into the back streets and bazaars of either Cawnpore or Lucknow.

Later that summer, however, I revisited Cawnpore to attend as a witness an inquiry into a death that happened at the BMH while I was there; the inquiry was protracted and because time hung on my hands I made a habit of walking into the town. One walk took me away from the main streets and I found myself among a large crowd: men, women, children, all thick about me, and all going, it seemed, in one direction, and packed so close that I had to go with the stream. I did not like crowds at the best of times and on that day I sensed hostility, a growing menace. They spoke to me in Hindi which my Urdu was not good enough to begin to follow; they groped in their clothing and made signs toward me in a way which I found frightening. I moved helplessly with them until a man who could speak a little English pushed himself to the front and it became clear that we were all bound for the Ganges because today there was an eclipse of the sun, a tremendous occasion which we must all watch from the banks of the sacred river. The things for which they were groping in their clothes were pieces of smoked glass. Everyone was anxious to offer me a piece of smoked glass so that I could observe the eclipse for myself. There was a tremendous excitement and tension in the crowd but the only tension I felt was that within me; it gave way to a feeling of relief

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

as I realised how foolish I had been: all anyone had wanted was to share with me his happiness at this auspicious event.

Five years after the partition of India I returned to Lucknow and to the Residency; there was no flag then on the old tower, and no flagpole (we had seen to that in 1947) but the gardens were lovely as ever, and young Indian students from the university lay on the grass and sat on the old cannon reading books in the last minutes, so they told me, before their examinations. They offered with smiles to show me round and tell me about the Residency.

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As February gave way to March the weather underwent a marked change. When I first arrived at Lucknow it was a pleasant surprise to have cool gentle rain on the parade ground in the morning followed later in the day by clouds high in the sky. As the weeks went by the temperature gradually rose to the 90s and rainstorms and thunderstorms began. By early March I would lie every afternoon half naked on my bed with both ends of the tent open while a dusty breeze blew through the tent and cooled me as it evaporated the sweat. Around the tent door the grey-headed Indian Crows which look like jackdaws walked with beaks wide open and in the tree over the tent I could hear the maddening call of the brain-fever bird. Hot and irritable, I complained one day to my old bearer because he did not bring me jam and toast with my tea.

‘Yscone today, Sahib’; it was information, not explanation or excuse. As soon as I drank the cup of hot tea I sweated profusely all over. It was getting steadily hotter by day and beginning to be much too warm for comfort at night. I wondered what it would be like in May.

I saw a lot of Terry. He had beautiful dark brown eyes, black curly hair and dark sallow skin. His nose was rather flat and his lips thick, his body slight and his gestures rather effeminate. He looked like some Indians, but he scorned Indians as much as he hated the British: there did not seem to be much left. His mother had died when he was young and he married when he was a student. He didn’t like medicine and wanted to be an engineer. He boasted about his sporting and intellectual accomplishments and at first I took him to be vain and

conceited; in fact he was trying to overcome the handicap of being Eurasian, an unlucky member of that unhappy race; we became friendly, though I was never reconciled to his haughty way with servants and with IORs. In the Mess he never forgot that he had some sort of superiority to establish. He seemed to like me and objected strongly when one day a signal came posting me to another unit.

I did not want that either and protested to the CO, who said

‘Don’t let it get you down, Charles; the only way to survive the shocking organisation in this country is to laugh. I’ll see about it.’

We had a party that night with the officers of our sister unit, and their quartermaster Westlake, who had just quarrelled with his own CO, muttered to me,

‘E’s not like your colonel, ‘e isn’t; Colonel Wakeford’s a real gent - that’s wot ‘e is.’

We were gathered in the Ante-room and the March night outside was moonlit, soft, beautiful and warm. The ante-room was lit by two pressure-lamps with incandescent mantles. In the centre was a low table where Westlake sat with Don and Dawson. Terry was a little back, looking on at their card game. In a chair by the wall sat a good natured Sikh doctor reading ‘Men Only’ without interest, as if wondering ‘What sort of stuff is it that these people read?’ Many of the chairs were empty. In one corner was the tall cupboard with a dart board hanging on it. Before the cupboard was the table on which was spread a white and scarlet cloth, rather altar-like, except that on it was a selection of bottles of spirits and lime juice.

I put something by Grieg on the gramophone; Mac had been listening to ‘Love’s joy and love’s sorrow’ but had gone out. The three at the table were intent on their game; Westlake looked like something out of the bottomless pit, lank, red-cheeked, sweaty-haired, grinning with hideous fangs; Don, sleek and oily in well cut khaki drill, had his back to me. Dawson, just posted to 5 IMFTU, was clearing his throat before each pompous pronouncement, as he used to do on the *Ranchi*; he looked slightly dishevelled. We were waiting, bored and hungry, for the signal to go in to dinner, which we could not

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

do until the CO appeared, drank his one gin and lime and smoked one cigarette.

There were various distractions at Lucknow. Although Kurup never made use of 'The Club' because he assumed that only Europeans were welcome there, I took him along one day to swim in the pool. He was used to the beaches of South India and in the pool he was transformed. He came to life and turned into a wonderfully joyous splashing and leaping creature; he hurled his fat little black body into the pool in every kind of fantastic dive and somersault, and said afterwards that it was the first day he had really enjoyed since being in the army.

That evening I went to the IOR lines with him and questioned the IORs about the stars, which were brilliant overhead. A little havildar (sergeant) head clerk, bright eyed and intelligent, a Triplicane Brahmin from Madras, poured out in good English a stream of confusing information about astrology. The stores jemadar, who also spoke English, joined in and muddled me even more. The planets, they said, controlled affairs on earth and were named according to their job. Jupiter was Guru, the teacher, and was the chief; but then there was the Pole Star, named in memory of a very holy man, whose name I immediately forgot, to whom Vishnu (or was it Krishna?) appeared when he was five years old. Alas, I soon lost track. We settled down on our backs, lying on the dry earth, smoking and looking up at the fireflies. They were plentiful at that season, and Fairley, medical specialist of 5 IMFTU, told me that their light shone regularly, 'On one second, off two seconds.'

Everything interested Fairley. He was older than most of us and had been in general practice in Scotland before he joined up. When I went to his tent I often found him setting up butterflies that he had caught. One I remember was a very large and beautiful black and red butterfly with spikes or horns on the fronts of its wings.

'What a pity' he said 'that so many other ranks, and officers too, come out here and find nothing beautiful or interesting. I was overjoyed when I heard I was coming out here.'

He already had a considerable collection of butterflies and knew far more than I did about Indian birds. In his tent he had a pair of

blossom-headed parakeets in a wooden cage; he had bought them in the bazaar and we sat and watched them for hours.

‘Look Charles, how their beak is just like a third claw for grasping a hold when they move about the cage.’

‘Their names are Horace and Irene’ he said. Irene was a devil, a domineering little creature, and Horace had a poor time of it. Fairley gestured with his head towards the tent door where I could see the faces of curious IORs looking at Fairley’s latest buy.

‘Of course’ he said ‘they regard me as hopelessly eccentric.’

Lucknow zoo was another diversion; I went there with Terry and Dawson. We watched Rosie, a one-horned rhinoceros from Nepal, not eating, just standing motionless like Eeyore with a mouthful of grass and thistles. There were storks, flamingos, cheetah, leopard, and a mangy lion. There were a tiger, llama, yak, pandas and a black Himalayan bear with a white V- front sitting on its haunches rocking from side to side. Zoos depress me and I walked off by myself to a place that I saw was called ‘The Ladies’ Mile’. There must be a ‘Ladies’ Mile’ in every cantonment and hill station in India.

The roots of a banyan tree formed a comfortable chair and I sat with my eyes closed, facing the sunset. I tried for the hundredth time to think out for myself what to do with the future. In the life we led I was always mentally alone, but at the same time I was in the company of people whose perpetual contact with me interfered with reflection. When I opened my eyes I looked at the blue jays with their tumbling flight and saw that while I had been sitting quietly a wild buck had come near; by contrast with the poor creatures in the zoo he was alert and beautiful, his coat shiny, glistening dark brown and white, his long spiral horns burnished.

When I sat alone, as I often did at sunrise and sunset I had a vivid impression of the tremendous plain, of the sun rising fast in the east and sinking fast in the west, up in the east bringing the heat of the day which drained you of strength, down in the west bringing the coolness of night, but not bringing relief until the small hours to the myriad bodies made restless by the heat. In my mind was always the image of the great wall to the north, the white snowy barrier I longed to see, and

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

beyond it, in imagination, the distance and immensity of Tibet and China. I could not reconcile these imaginings and longings with a return to a conventional career, with suburban life, a home and marriage with Betty, to whom in the fashion of the time I was formally and by my own standards firmly tied. It was then that I decided that I must sever the link.

Our training was nearly finished and the newly enlisted ragamuffins of February had been turned into something like the staff of a field hospital. We gave a few last lectures about camouflage and sent companies of men off into the sparse jungle to practise what we thought we had taught them. Terry and I followed to inspect their work. We stood in apparently deserted scrub, seeing nothing until suddenly startled by a chorus of wild yells and laughter which seemed to come from the ground, the trees, the air itself. They proudly showed tents, lorries and trenches which we should not have noticed, and we reflected that concealment might be one thing these children of the jungle did not have to learn from us.

Many peacocks walked and flew in this bit of jungle; it seemed that they were very good to eat and that although holy they were often shot for the table. I asked Nur Mahomet the Urdu name for them and was given the dismissive reply to which I was by now accustomed:

‘Sahib, jangali janvar hai’

‘Sir, it is but jungly creature’

Some of the tall trees had bright red flowers which carpeted the ground when they fell; Nur Mahomet picked them to adorn my hat.

Long after dark I went and sat in moonlight by a railway not far from our camp. A freight train about a quarter of a mile long went slowly past, drawn by a huge American-built locomotive with a haunting two tone whistle; they were engines much used at the time on railways in Bengal and Assam, and I think were part of ‘lend-lease’. In the distance, beyond our camp, I could hear the beating of drums and tin cans, and the discordant ringing of bells. The Hindu festival of ‘Holi’ was beginning. I liked the quiet by the railway.

Holi began on the 10th March. I went to the lines at midmorning to make sketches of the Hindu sepoy dancing. An elaborate dance

was in progress, IORs playing the parts of men and women. The dance was wholly sexual, fascinating and rather horrible at the same time. The female impersonators wore saris; the movements were perfectly imitated and the faces (they were hardly more than boys) sometimes beautiful; extravagant breasts had been fitted, and it was only the occasional accidental display of a brawny arm that told me that I was not looking at a pretty girl. The male partners in the dance were inexpressibly loathsome; old, grey haired and grey bearded, made up with frightening faces and terrible grins, they waved their naked forearms, fists clenched, a little below the horizontal, from a point under the waist, where 'testicles' as big as mangoes hung. The effect was dark and sinister. The display was accompanied by lithe movements of the hips and a steady rhythm of drums and of a guitar-like instrument with one string. The party moved at last to my tent and into it for a grand finale, and our clothes and hair were powdered with orange and scarlet dye, incurring the mild disapproval of the CO who indicated that our behaviour did not become officers and gentlemen.

But we had not finished, for in the evening there was more dancing and a professional 'woman' was produced, with a woman's figure, gold rings in his nose and ears, smaller breasts, and silver rings on wrists and ankles. This expert far outshone the amateurs (our own soldiers) of the morning. My eyes were riveted on him as, still dancing, he went down and down on his back, his shoulders not quite touching the ground, his hips moving convulsively.

On the 15th March the sky was overcast and the afternoon very hot until at 1930 a violent electric storm began. First the wind rose, bringing dust - I could hear its approach in the trees - then it was on us and for a moment I thought that the tent was going sky high; there was a tremendous crack overhead, the flashes were blinding, about one every three seconds, and the roll of thunder was continuous.

By the end of March training was finished and we were ready to move. As a final exercise Kurup and I marched the IORs three miles out on the Sultanpur Road and set up a model of our working hospital in a mango grove. By the road we passed the carcass of some large animal hidden by the vultures which quarrelled over it. Every tree around was full of waiting birds and when they clumsily took to the air

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

and flew past us with slow-flapping wings we caught the disgusting smell of carrion. There were about a hundred of them.

We dyed our clothes 'jungle green' with a powder issued for the purpose; everything, including sheets and handkerchiefs, was dyed by boiling in tins on open fires dotted all over the camp.

On the 5th April we were to start for Assam, the 'forward area' where in Kurup's words 'all man is God-fearing, is it not?' I repacked my gear so as to take with me only what I thought essential, and when travelling with the equivalent of a Field Ambulance that meant a good deal. In Lucknow bazaar I bought a small 'tin' trunk, manufactured locally, a common article of baggage among the travelling middle class in India,

'Very good value, Sahib. 15 rupees. All tin. Pure tin, Sahib. Look.'

It would do to protect my most precious belongings from white ants. The rest would have to go in my bedding roll. What I could not take I packed in my large tin trunk and deposited in a Lucknow bank to be collected goodness knew when.'

On our last day we visited the laboratory at the BMH Lucknow to look down microscopes again. A charming Sikh major with a handsome beard made sure that we had everything we needed, including freshly prepared slides of infected blood; he was as helpful and well mannered as an English major who was also on the staff there was ill-bred and rude. At the Sikh's invitation we sat down before the microscopes to refresh our memories about malaria parasites.

On the way back to camp I walked with Dawson and Fairley through Dilkusha gardens and we saw Golden Orioles, a Black-Headed Oriole, a Purple Sunbird and Chestnut-Headed Bee Eaters.



Chapter 8 The Assam-Burma Border

Between the plains of India, including Assam, and the central plain of Burma was a range of wild mountains covered with jungle. It began at the east end of the Himalayan chain in that tangle of mountain country where no one could have told you where India, Burma, Tibet and China began and ended; and those who slipped from valley to valley on their own business preferred that you did not inquire too closely about frontier or business.

From between the Brahmaputra river and the headwaters of the Irrawaddy and Chindwin somewhere near Putao the range ran southwest and then south for 500 miles to reach the Bay of Bengal and be lost in the coastal part of Burma known as Arakan.

The jumble of mountains rose in places to 12,000 feet. If you looked at the available maps you could see a few tracks and occasional clusters of dots which represented villages; roads of any kind were almost non-existent and the region never provided a regular trade route between India and Burma. Here and there on the maps were blank white spaces across which the word Unsurveyed was written.

The climate was like that of tropical rain forest, hot and humid, noted in encyclopaedias for the average annual rainfall of 429 ins at Cherrapunji in the Khasi hills at the edge of the range. The malaria mosquito was common and the district notorious for the most virulent type of malaria and for tick typhus.

The mountains had been shaped by erosion, and typically were a confusion of high steep-sided ridges separated by deep river-valleys. The rocks were friable and such tracks as were made in those hills were always in need of repair.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

In the middle of the mountains, roughly halfway between India and Burma, there was an oval of flatter ground, the bed of an old lake, about 40 miles by 20. Here was the capital Imphal of the Indian native state of Manipur; the little shanty town and its immediate surroundings were inhabited by a race known as Manipuris. The hills to north and south were inhabited by a variety of more or less primitive tribes of interest to anthropologists; some of them were said to hunt heads now and then, but only as a social custom, not with malice. Among the many hill tribes were the Nagas to the north and the Chins to the south, both of whom helped us during the war with Japan.

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When the Japanese invaded Burma in 1942 it was through those mountains that General Slim brought out what remained of Burma Army, together with thousands of civilian fugitives from the Japanese occupation of Burma. The main retreat was by way of the Chindwin and Kabaw valleys over the mountains to Imphal and thence into Assam and India. Other parties reached Assam by the Hukawng valley and yet others by the Pangsau pass. Whatever the route the tracks and weather were atrocious, the suffering great and the dead never counted; there were thousands of them, men, women and children of many races, Indian, British, Burmese and Eurasian.

During 1943 the Japanese were content to reinforce their armies in Burma and did not attempt any advance in the north; our armies stood on a line east of the mountain chain as far south as the Chin hills. Only in Arakan did the Japanese make a push towards India that year, and with only partial success. They tried again in Arakan at the beginning of 1944 but were decisively stopped by Slim in February at the battles on and beyond the Ngakeydauk Pass.

In the spring of 1944 the Japanese began to advance in the north with three divisions, attacking towards Imphal and the hill village of Kohima, which was strategically placed astride the supply road from Dimapur in Assam. They came from the south through the Chin hills, from the east by the Kabaw valley and from farther north by jungle paths in the Patkai and Naga hills.

In the last week of March they surprised the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade at the tiny village of Sangshak, north east of Imphal, and only

took the village after a savage 5-day battle in which there were some 600 casualties on each side. The survivors of 50th Parachute Brigade had at last run out of ammunition and water and been ordered to retire under cover of darkness.

By the beginning of April our troops in the Chin hills had been withdrawn to the Imphal plain, units east of Imphal had withdrawn to form a defensive ring in the hills round the plain, the non-combatants had been sent from Kohima down the road to Dimapur, and the fighting troops near Kohima had been formed into a small defensive 'box' at that village. The Japanese were by this time at the edge of the Imphal plain, and to the north Naga scouts had sighted Japanese columns marching along jungle tracks and converging in strength on Kohima.

That was the general military position when Nos 5 and 7 IMFTU were getting ready at Lucknow to board a train for Assam.

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Chapter 9 Assam

‘Charles, the signal’s bloody stuck again.’ Bill Gleed came lumbering back to our coach, mopping his forehead. He was a big man with a beery belly. He seized the handrails on each side of the steps to the compartment and after hoisting himself up began to fan his face with his bush hat. We were in a railway siding in Bengal and had been there some hours while other trains went by. It was the middle of the day, the slatted wooden shades on the sunny side of our compartment were closed and everything on the shady side was open, including the door.

My favourite seat when the train was moving was on the floor in the open doorway, my feet on the step below. There was a cooling breeze in the doorway and I could watch the life of the country as we rumbled by at 20 miles an hour; men were at work in the small fields at dawn, women walked gracefully along the bunds with pitchers balanced on their heads. During the heat of the day the men lay asleep in the shade under mango trees or squatted smoking; they held the biri or the pipe bowls in their cupped hands, near but not touching their mouths. I saw groups of villagers shoulder-deep in ‘tanks’, artificial ponds made of earth and clay; they were fishing with nets or collecting weed from the bottom; they put what they found into pots that floated near them.

Some of the many stops were at villages. It was the year after the Bengal famine of 1943, and in Bihar and Bengal we saw the effects everywhere: emaciated women, men whose limbs were so thin that I could make out the shape of every bone, families grubbing for scraps in heaps of cinders and rubbish. The children were the worst to see, their arms and legs spindly, their eyes hollow and their bellies big. We wondered naively why people like these had children and why

anyone bothered to fight disease in such places; at one halt the CO was standing by me and as we looked at the pitiful multitude I heard him say 'It's terrible, Charles, terrible; Sulfa drugs are a very mixed blessing.' On the train we isolated ourselves from these wretched people; sepoys and British alike, we did not feel any community with them; we put them away from us. We could not look on them as human; perhaps it was we who were not human.

From my seat in the doorway I had a wonderful opportunity as we travelled to see a huge variety of birds, many of them new to me. There were bee-eaters of several kinds on the posts and wires, drongos or king-crows with curly forked tails, shrikes, wire-tailed swallows and, on the backs of buffaloes and cattle, or near them on the ground, crows, egrets and mynahs. The Brahminy kite, a handsome bird of prey with a chestnut body and white head, immaculately dressed, perching on posts near water.

We had a special train for the two IMFTUs. When we marched to the train at Lucknow the sepoys reminded me of our draft marching to the train at Leeds, except that instead of singing Tipperary and Roll Out The Barrel the Indians shouted to their gods. I shared a four berth compartment with Wallace Parke and the registrars of the two IMFTUs, Bill Gleed and Usher. 'Special train' sounded very grand but meant only that we could be pushed into a siding without warning when more important trains were to pass to the Assam front; we had no time-table and we never knew when we were going to halt or for how long. However, there were advantages - one day we stopped at mid morning and were told that we should be there until evening; I could take a company of the IORs up a small bare hill not very far away and we had an informal and exhilarating walk which did us a lot of good. The hill was less than 1000 ft high, rocky, and covered with a scented scrub rather like sage-brush; walking was easy and on the summit a cool breeze did a great deal to make us feel fresh and energetic.

At all but the briefest halts the IORs walked up the line to the engine, taking large dekchies in which they put tea leaves, condensed milk and sugar; the train driver added several gallons of scalding water from the engine boiler; two men were needed to carry back each full dekchi. As they passed our carriage we dipped our chipped enamel

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

mugs in the hot, sweet, milky brew. Food was brought at some of the stops; those of us who did not care for bully beef and biscuits ate the same as the Indians - chapattis of unleavened bread, dal (lentils) and curry - I preferred it.

At one halt a child of about 12 shaved the soldiers with an open razor; they squatted face to face on the platform and the barber was rewarded with some fraction of an anna. At another halt I watched oxen walking round and round a threshing floor, trampling a little grain. The huge plain was a constant reminder of the struggle to survive on the sparse yield of this meagre soil. We passed cities with famous names like Benares where, from a high railway bridge, I saw the river frontage of a thousand temples and below me the burning ghats and the bathing ghats and the multitudes doing homage in the sacred Ganges. We came to big junctions and yards near Calcutta - Asansol, Burdwan; the stops became longer and more frequent. We took it in turns to trudge along to talk with the engine drivers and find out why the signal had 'stuck' this time, and how long it was going to be so.

Near Calcutta and the delta country there were green coconuts for sale and we drank the milk. But the mugs of tea made with engine water were more refreshing. On the fourth day the train reached the Brahmaputra at Sirajganj.

It was Easter Sunday, the 9th April. Kohima and the Imphal plain were under attack, and Dimapur threatened. The battles of Imphal and Kohima were soon to be at their height. Not until the 18th April was the besieged Kohima garrison at last relieved, and it was to be six more weeks before the battle of the Kohima ridge was won and the road to Imphal was once again open.

At Sirajganj a river steamer was tied to the bank and we went on board: IORs, BORs, Officers, everyone except those who had gone by road with the transport and heavy gear; they would cross the river farther up, at Jogighopa.

We waited a day and a night at Sirajganj. The IORs slept on deck and there was a saloon where some of the rest of us slept; I chose to set up my bed on deck where I could watch the river. There were permanent cookhouses and mess tents on shore above the river bank.

What was most wanted seemed to be an unlimited supply of hot sweet tea, and of this there was plenty. At meal times we lined up at the cookhouse with our plates and mugs to collect food and dash for the cover of a dining tent before the food was snatched by the kites circling overhead. They were very bold and would swoop down to take the meat off your plate unless you held your hat over it for protection; they seized it with a claw before transferring it to the beak in flight. Corporal Heywood, long limbed and given to slouching, for weeks had carried a pet chameleon in the fold of his bush hat; it met its fate here for it was snatched by a kite as he walked from the river to the cookhouse.

Walking along the river bank at sunset I came on a recent cremation site. There were tattered flags on thin bamboos, some charred logs and a few bones so fiercely burnt that I could crush what was left of a vertebra between finger and thumb. There was a bit of skull, two heads of femur, a hip bone and some odds and ends. It must have been a small rather delicately made person. The wind sang over the sand and in the broom, and a phrase from a poem came into my head - something about 'Mystery of being and of time'; I had no answer. I turned to watch the pied kingfishers hovering over the water.

The river was brown and frothy, and the current strong. I could see the backs of creatures I took to be porpoises, except that I did not know of any fresh-water animals of that sort. Later I found that the Brahmaputra and Ganges had their own fresh-water 'dolphins' known as Susu. They are sightless and spend their lives grubbing about in the mud on the river bottom - the human lot, I used to think when discontented - and what a good term of abuse - 'You Susu!'

By night the reflections of the moon and of the yellow lamps of boats moored along the bank moved ceaselessly on the water. Don had set up his gramophone in the saloon and I listened to Beethoven's Violin Concerto sandwiched between 'Coming through the Rye' and other records. I never afterwards heard the concerto without remembering that scene.

When I woke the sun was rising over the huge river. We had not moved. The breeze was pleasantly cool. Sirajganj was a desolate

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

place: nothing there except the end of a railway and some tents; no hills in the distance, just sand blowing past, the Brahmaputra rolling by and the far bank so far away as to be barely visible. The country boats moored near us had people living on them and I watched a man at his morning bath; standing up to his waist in the shallows he cleared his mouth and nose with his fingers, swept the scum from the surface of the water before him, covered his ears with his hands, and dipped first his head and then his whole body in the river. How fastidious he was in his own way, yet some of us called them 'filthy bloody Indians'! When he had finished washing he put his hands together and bowed in the direction of the rising sun.

We got under weigh and after lunch (bread and bully beef) were hit by heavy rain and a squall of wind. All the sepoy's rushed to the lee side and for a moment caused a serious list, but we did not capsize. At night, tied to the bank again, I watched them dancing on deck. Next morning, the 11th April, I lay in bed by the rail watching the high bank go by, a thin layer of soil on level sandstone cliff. On top of the soil there was a little grass, and here and there a tree; a man walked behind a plough drawn by a bullock. I was looking at a cross section of the earth's crust, and at man clinging with his roots hardly any way into the soil.

River boats ('Country boats' they were called) passed by, stout craft perhaps 50 feet long with a pointed stem and high bulky stern. There was a mast amidships and aft of it a low bamboo house. For days they drifted quietly downstream with their cargoes until the time came to return; then they were towed up river by long ropes fixed to the top of the mast, three men walking on the bank, hauling.

We passed groups of cool-looking leafy bungalows on rocky islands covered with trees. They looked an earthly paradise: there were little boats everywhere and the great stream flowing by. The terns were different from those of the Ganges, smaller, with a dark, sometimes black body, white back and wings, and bright red bill.

On 12th April we turned in to the south bank of the river at Gauhati and disembarked. No one seemed to expect us or know anything about us, so we waited, cooked a meal and later re-embarked to go a mile downstream to Pandu. The shore was neater at Pandu and

the country more open. I strolled on the very edge of the river, above a sandstone cliff, and saw several pied kingfishers hovering over the water. I climbed down to the water's edge to inspect what looked like a dugout canoe; it turned out to be made of four or five long planks cunningly joined.

We slept on shore two nights at Pandu and I went with Kurup for a walk in the local jungle, taking a pair of binoculars. We saw a kingfisher with a long heavy bill, conspicuous white shirt-front, copper-coloured head and shoulders and the rest blue-green - the 'White-breasted Kingfisher'. We saw also the smaller common kingfisher and several other birds. There were various kinds of bulbul, the commonest rather drab except for a red patch near the tail - the 'Red-Vented Bulbul'; a smarter kind was the 'White-Cheeked' with a jaunty crest, white cheeks and red patches. On our last morning I heard the call of a bird which Kurup said was 'The auspicious bird' or 'kapor pata'; it is the Indian cuckoo known by various onomatopoeic versions of its call - in the Himalayan foothills 'karpal pukka' ('the karpal berry is ripe'). Its quiet insistent voice fills hot days of walking through the jungles of the foothills, the syllables accented as in the words 'orange pekoe'. I saw one near our camp at Pandu, and it was very like the common cuckoo of Europe.

We travelled another 200 miles by rail through flat, thickly wooded country which now and then opened up and revealed floodland and swamp. In one such place I saw a bird about the size and shape of a moorhen walking elegantly and delicately across the leaves which floated on the water; its tail was long and slender and curved like a pheasant's, and its long toes were spread wide to distribute its weight on the floating leaves - the 'Pheasant-tailed Jacana', sometimes called 'the lily-trotter'.

The big American engines and wide coaches rolled a great deal on the narrow-gauge tracks of Assam; all night we seemed in the jungle to pass between solid black walls; at times we passed through clouds of fireflies.

We reached Dimapur on the 16th April and by nightfall were comfortably settled in what were called bashas, bamboo dwellings characteristic of Assam; the frame was made of the trunks of bamboos

and the walls of bamboo matting. The roof might be made of anything from banana leaves to corrugated iron painted red and the floor was of mud or sometimes cement. Occasionally the walls of a high-class basha might be of brick or lath and plaster.

Dimapur, also called Manipur Road, was little more than a rough clearing in the jungle, and the only reason for its existence was that it was a convenient point for the transfer from rail to road of goods destined for the hill state of Manipur. The railway passed through on its way to lonely tea gardens beyond Tinsukia in upper Assam, and only a few sidings and sheds marked the unloading place. A rude bazaar of small tin and bamboo shanties stood at the beginning of the road into the hills, and in the jungle round about was a scattering of bashas of different shapes and sizes; some of these had been offices and dwellings for a small staff, and others, long buildings with one side open, may have been accommodation for coolies, of which a large number was needed for the transshipment of goods. The site had an air of being run down and overgrown.

At some time an effort had been made to drain this malarious spot, for drainage channels ran in many directions among the challenging jungle plants. The soil was hard and dry and there was no grass, but near the bashas that we were to occupy were the remains of attempts to plant small gardens; rows of painted stones enclosed a few flowers, pale blue and magenta convolvulus and tall golden iris; before one basha a fragile arch of bamboo trellis supported a climbing rose and framed a low bamboo gateway. The ground was carpeted with mimosa, a low creeping plant only three or four inches high, a tracery of fine twigs and tiny leaves arranged as delicately as a fern. At a touch the leaves would shrink away and the whole carpet collapse, flattened to the earth: *mimosa pudens*. The whole place had the look of a refuse dump, not improved by the additional clearings and the growth of temporary accommodation needed to supply an army that was to meet the advance of the Japanese through Burma. Perhaps the most interesting relic of the past at Dimapur was deep in the forest, a strange collection of megaliths, huge phallic stone pillars of obscure religious significance. It was referred to with relish by the BORs as 'Penis Park'.

5 IMFTU opened first, in tents in a clearing well away from the railway. Soon large numbers of sick were being brought in each day and the MOs of 5 IMFTU were at full stretch. I was told to go there and help Fairley and Dawson with the British patients; I used to walk over (it was about a quarter of a mile) early in the morning and work there until evening when I came back for dinner at my own unit.

The patients lay in rows on stretchers on the ground in a large marquee-style tent. I began the day by seeing new patients who had come in during the night; I would kneel by the stretchers to question and examine each man and fill in, before I moved to the next man, the printed card on which we kept a record of each patient. These men were usually typical cases of what was euphemistically known as 'Benign Tertian Malaria' - 'feevah'. The attacks came on regularly every other day; during attacks the patients felt cold and started to shiver violently until their temperature rose and they broke out in a profuse sweat. When the attacks were over they would get up and walk about listlessly in ill-fitting hospital pyjamas. They were very thin, and they looked pale and ill and weak, their skins stained yellow with Mepacrine. Nursing by our male orderlies, when all there was for a bed was a canvas stretcher, was primitive, but at least the patients were being cared for, and they were away from the fighting up the road.

I wrote the details of symptoms and examination on the cards, followed by my diagnosis and instructions for treatment. The treatment was carried out by the NCOs and for cases of malaria consisted of regular dosage with pills: quinine, Mepacrine (Atebrin) and Pamaquin; patients were also given a mixture of aspirin, phenacetin and codeine for headaches and other pains. An NCO took blood samples from all new patients so that we could look for malaria parasites to confirm the diagnosis; the whole process was regular and mechanical except when a patient was unusually ill or suffered from some illness other than malaria.

There was a Field Ambulance near us at Dimapur and the doctors there also were having a busy time because large numbers of battle casualties were being brought down from Kohima, many seriously wounded and some who had had to lie for days in the open. It was one

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

of them that said to me 'Whatever else you may say about the Jap, Sir, you can't say that he's yellow.'

I enjoyed my walks to and from 5 IMFTU in the cool of the day, a footpath through luxuriant jungle where I used to loiter to look at whatever there was to see, like the small lizards about 5 ins long on a pile of wood which I passed every day; they had red heads, a frill round the neck and very quick movements. I saw there the biggest termite hills I had yet seen; from their size and shape I concluded that the ants must invade the stumps of dead trees, dead forest giants; certainly they invaded the bamboos used to build bashas, and the beams and uprights of all our dwellings bore the characteristic lines of dry earth that showed where the termite tunnels ran just under the surface. There were many kinds of more ordinary ants; and once, when I climbed a small tree to look at what I thought was a bird's nest I found a nest of red ants; they were about an inch long, angry and hard-biting. I came down that tree very quickly and plunged into a pool, pouring water into my ears to get the ants out.

On my morning walk to work I could usually see to the south a range of dark green hills partly hidden by long lines of cloud; they were about 5,000 feet high and 40 to 50 miles away, the hills where the siege of Kohima was nearing its end.

Fairley took life philosophically. Lying on his bed one day in the heat of the afternoon while he fed Horace the parakeet, he told me how his colonel had been put out that morning by a visit from the Area Commander, Major General Rankin, who annoyed him by saying that he seemed 'peace-minded'. Fairley, faced with his colonel, was imperturbable. The day after Rankin called, Fairley's colonel came to his tent at 0700 when he was feeding Horace and said abruptly that it was 'No good, Fairley, unless we get cracking before seven.' Fairley answered 'There's a good deal in what you say,' and went on with the feeding.

Our days were full; every stretcher in the tents was occupied; but in the heat of the afternoon we lay down for a time or took a short walk together in the shade of the jungle, seeing a multitude of birds. We saw jungle-fowl, rather like ordinary barn door fowl, and heard a call not known to us - 'Hoo, hoo, hoo' (I knew it later as the

Himalayan cuckoo) but could not find the bird. Instead we came on a noisy party of hornbills busy among some low branches - weird caricatures of birds, the heavy bill and casque almost as big as the rest of the body. We found tea growing wild and supposed it to be an 'escape' from a plantation. Walks in the forest were best very early in the morning when every path was criss-crossed with spiders' webs on which beads of dew glistened. Some of the spiders were large (several inches across) and beautifully coloured, yellow, green, black and red. Insects were innumerable: praying mantis, beetles, and wonderfully camouflaged stick and leaf insects. The forest was always noisy; there was a continuous low humming made of a thousand noises that I could not disentangle, and above the humming were the calls I recognised: the raucous calling of jungle fowl, the screeching of magpie-like birds and the monotonous metallic unstopping tonk, tonk, tonk of the coppersmith, a shy bird that I rarely saw. On my first day at Dimapur I had been aware of a loud noise like that of a line being drawn steadily off a fishing reel; it came from the trees all around and was a continuous sound on which a louder rhythmic noise was superimposed. I thought at first that a bird was responsible but later found it to be a cicada. The noise of cicadas, like the call of the coppersmith, was never absent from life at Dimapur; you had to raise your voice if a cicada was near and you had to give up conversation or write down the message if there were several. The noise was louder at night and at dusk, and sometimes in the Mess we caught one of these peculiarly ugly insects of which there were many kinds. One kind we called 'The Flying Frog'; it was about two inches long, and its bulging eyes made it look not unlike a frog. Kurup came along when I had just made a drawing of one.

'What is this?' he said, 'that one that comes and disturbs in our Mess, is it not?'

One night our CO at 7 IMFTU was sitting on his verandah at dusk; he felt something on the back of his neck and put up his hand thinking to brush off an ant. His hand closed on a 'Flying Frog' and feeling a strange object he hurriedly brought it to his front for inspection, then leapt from his chair crying 'God, it's You.' So it (or they, for we usually found more than one a night) became a symbol, a kind of deity. They were One and we knew Him.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

One day I went for a walk alone and carelessly lost my way. My sense of direction was soon entirely gone and my only guide to the way back was by occasional glimpses of the sun through the forest. I was surrounded by the profusion and tangle of the jungle. Huge trees soared up to arch overhead like pillars I had once seen in Westminster Abbey; the bark was grey and the lower parts of the trunks spread out in wide slender supporting buttresses. I looked up through a framework of hanging aerial roots and trailing creepers to tufts of greenery at the very tops of the towering trees. I came on two Assamese who greeted me from a distance by showing their open palms. They carried long knives or dahs, broader at the end than near the handle, and they pointed out to me the way back to Dimapur. A patient asked me where I had been and when I told him commented glumly,

‘If you’d been in the bleedin’ infantry as long as I ’ave, you wouldn’t go for any fuckin’ walks.’

7 IMFTU

7 IMFTU began to take in patients early in May and my trips to No.5 ended. For the next four months I was kept busy in our unit. John Wakeford gave me the sick BORs to look after and also put me in charge of the unit dispensary.

Our patients were accommodated in bashas. The larger of these huts, open along one side, were about 30 yds long and eight feet wide, a bit wider, that is, than the length of a stretcher; we used these as wards.

Near the entrance to the site there was a group of small huts in which we, the MOs, slept and nearby was a slightly larger hut which did as a dining room or Mess for us; it was big enough to take a table round which six could sit; a small marquee tent served as the Ante-room.

Ten yards from our living quarters was a basha which we set aside as a clinical laboratory and ward for the very ill. There were three rooms: in one we put a workbench, microscopes and a few necessary bottles; the second room we made into an office for ‘Smudger’ Smith, the sergeant from South Wales who was in charge of the ward, and in

the third room, which measured about 30 feet by 15, we put folding beds for cases which needed special treatment and constant attention. ‘Smudger’, Sgt Smith RAMC, was a big, young fair man with a bit too much flesh; he was kind and gentle and he made a very good ward sister. As well as running the ‘very sick’ ward he ran a library for the walking patients and pinned up on a notice board the library’s one rule

—

‘On no account will leaves be torn from books as not only is this extremely bad form but spoils the enjoyment of others.’

He addressed me as ‘Dr.Evans, Sahib’ and came to me sometimes to complain when the work in his ward was a bit too much for him. Talking about it helped. Our relationship was not very military but it was good for the patients.

Not far away, but isolated from other buildings, was a small basha, about 10 feet by six; a padlock could be hung for appearance’s sake on the door and here was the unit dispensary. I arranged for the boxes of stores to be stacked so that I could work at a table before a shaded window on one side of the hut. The ‘window’ of the basha was merely an opening with a flap; there was no glass and a thief could easily get in. To help me run the dispensary I was given a small dark assistant called Mohammed Aziz who knew absolutely nothing about medicines; I sat down to recall what I had been taught of pharmacy and dispensing. Not everything had been taught in the laboratories of Oxford and some things I had to learn as I went along. I was in the habit of mixing Gum Arabic with the powdered aspirin, phenacetin and caffeine used to make pain killer for the patients; when I had a bucketful of the thick white mixture I dispensed it in bottles to the various wards; when I came near the bottom of the first bucket I realised that there was something more here than the mixture that I was doling out, and by and by came to first the tail and then the remainder of a decomposing rat. No one was any the worse for the rich mixture.

Acting unpaid Lance Naik (L/Cpl) Mohammed Aziz had a sharp little face and never did any grousing; I gradually got to like him and depend on him. When I asked him about his home and family; he told me with some pride that he was a Rajput Mussalman - a ‘Brahmin’, he

said, 'very high caste, Sir'; he had three brothers, one sister, one wife and no children; next time he went home on leave he planned to get another wife because this one 'bahut hi choti hai' was too small. Muslims, he told me, commonly had two wives, but three, four or more only if some of the older ones died. I was puzzled by his description of his 'very high caste' - he could hardly be Muslim and Brahmin - so I asked him if sweepers were Muslim or Hindu,

'Oh, they are nothing, Sir.'

I never did solve the question of exactly what he was but thought him probably a Mussalman from Rajputana. Whatever he was he fell a victim to malaria and after a few days' absence turned up dressed in baggy hospital pyjamas with a towel round his head, looking sorry for himself and asking for 'headache powders'. He informed me that he had 'MT, Sahib' - malignant tertian or 'damn bad feevah', and it occurred to me that Benign Tertian would hardly have done for someone with his aristocratic pretensions. One day a gramophone record of a song by Vera Lynn was being played in the BOR convalescents' tent and I asked Mohammed Aziz if he liked 'music'; he looked blankly at me so I gestured towards the noise and said 'English songs, do you like them?' He was always polite, 'I would if I knew what the words meant, Sahib.'

I was occasionally exasperated by Mohammed Aziz, as when I had a bad cold myself and, helping myself to our home made aspirin powders, found that he was putting only half the proper dose into each; when I reprimanded him he listened as always with quiet composure and without protest. In spite of his lowly rank he would give instructions even to VCOs.; he did so with an unselfconscious and automatic authority as though, I thought, he had absolute confidence in his social position. It was not that he had a dominating personality; he just had something that I did not understand which enabled him to talk with superiors in rank in the army as though with equals.

When he joined me he could not write the letters of the English alphabet correctly; I taught him very little, for my knowledge of Urdu was elementary but in two months, by watching everything I did, he learnt to run the dispensary on his own. He remembered the amounts

for making up stock medicines, he weighed carefully, and he was honest. I normally directed what he did but when I was ill and once when I was away for more than a week I trusted him completely with the routine work and he did not let me down. To pick up all this from a foreigner who did not speak his language properly, in a subject about which to begin with he knew nothing, argued a good and adaptable mind.

To Mohammed Aziz all the technical words were strange and he invented his own romanised spellings for the sounds: for instance ‘miss pock sick’ for mist. pot. cit. (potassium citrate mixture) and ‘miss sline’ for mist. saline. (saline mixture).

Hari Shankar, the batman I shared with the CO, was by contrast shy, awkward and much less intelligent; he was not slow to pick up ideas but he did not get them right; he had difficulty in grasping simple mechanical ideas which would not have bothered Mohammed Aziz for a moment. He had no sense of proportion or of priorities. A utilitarian job would be forgotten because an artistic notion presented itself and he would devote himself for hours to small quite unimportant tasks. For example: I asked him to make a mud wall inside my tent to direct the rain out, and he built it outside so that the water was directed in. I had a trench outside the tent to drain away the water which fell heavily each night, and he filled part of this useful drain with soil so that he could plant flowers on each side of the entrance; he then built two low walls from my doorway for a few yards and planted them also with flowers - but there was still no wall inside the tent to keep the floor dry. I put up with much of this because Hari Shankar was doing his best and, as Kurup was fond of saying,

‘You do not want clever man as servant; you want man who loves you.’ And after all he had been quick enough one night, when I thought I had asked him to ‘Put a light in the lamp’, to let me know that what I had actually said in his language was ‘Put the lamp in the fire.’

Hari Shankar was taking off my boots one evening; the sun was setting over a dark green foreground, the sky a brilliant yellow, shading above to reds, purples, and pale blues. As I sat in my camp

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

chair I pointed west and said in my best Urdu that it looked beautiful, or something like that, and he said 'UP (his home province) there, Sahib.' I asked if he was homesick and he said 'No. I am here now. I will go back with medal when we all go.' He was sacked from being a batman after ironing the CO's drill trousers with too hot an iron, and burning holes in the material; he made the mistake of trying to hide the black patches by cutting them away with scissors. The solution was too simple and he had to go.

My next batman, Sadheo, came from Nepal and was extraordinarily stupid. He came from a village under Dhaolagiri; I had never heard of Dhaolagiri then but it is one of the great peaks of the Nepal Himalaya and many of the Gurkhas were recruited from the primitive tribes of that part of Nepal. I did not discover anything about Sadheo's past but I suspected that he was too stupid even for the Gurkhas. We had no common language, and he would squat or stand for hours watching me when his work for me (and there was never much of it) was done. I became uneasy under his fixed stare and usually told him to go; I had to tell him several times, louder and louder until I was shouting, before he would go, the reason for his reluctance being that when he returned to the IOR lines some NCO would find him work. We remained as far as I could tell on friendly terms and the longer he was with me the better I liked him. I was never able to make head or tail of what he said although he tried hard to make me understand him, as a last resort by shouting; then he would suddenly realise how he had been shouting at me and that it was no use because I still didn't understand, or perhaps couldn't hear, and we would both grin like hell. Then he would go off and do a job of his own choosing and I would come back later to see what it had all been about. Sadheo's skin was pale and lightly pockmarked; he had pronounced Tibeto-Burman features and a thin but definite moustache. I had him as batman for about three months after we left Dimapur. He remained extremely lazy and rather cunning; he had various treasures such as a 'swagger cane' with a bit of silver on the end of it, and because it was not safe in his kit he used to hide it by day in my bed, something I discovered by happening to sit on it. He liked heavily scented hair-oil and hid the bottles in my boots. He smoked ganja (Indian hemp) a great deal and in the end became so useless to me that, likeable or not, I had to sack him too. It was an unhappy end for

him because an officer's batman had various 'perks' and escaped many irksome duties.

Work on the wards at 7 IMFTU was like that at No.5 except that sometimes the colonel came round with me. John Wakeford would stand at the foot of each stretcher looking at the patients' admission cards and the results of their blood tests. He noticed at once the number of regular takers of Mepacrine who were nevertheless down with first attacks of malaria, and we wondered how regular their taking of Mepacrine had really been in the circumstances of their life 'up the road', and under the insidious influence of tales that these tablets that made you yellow also made you impotent.

We took mosquitoes very seriously. XIVth Army orders were 'Shirt sleeves rolled down and trousers tucked into socks after sundown' and everyone in static camps like ours slept under mosquito nets as did the patients on their stretchers. Wide deep drains had been cut through the site to clear away standing water and lessen the number of breeding places for mosquitoes, and there was a daily morning routine to keep down mosquitoes in the camp. My day started before dawn with the arrival of the 'FLIT SQUAD'; the party, headed by some kind of NCO, and invaded my bedroom before I was up. They were children, funny little barefoot ragamuffins in dirty vests and shorts who smoked cigarettes as fast as they could light them. All armed with flit guns, they went round buildings and tents to spray inside every corner and shaded spot.

Running the dispensary gave me a reason to visit the Base Depot Medical Stores a few miles out past Dimapur bazaar on the Nichugard road. The first time I went to the bazaar the foreground of dust and soil was a bright reddish ochre above which the luxuriant green of the trees stood out against great white clouds and bright blue sky. I saw orchids growing on a tree, plumbago in flower, and the lovely heavy sweet flowers of frangipani. On each side of the road was what they called 'partially exploited jungle', jungle which had been cleared in a patchy way for cultivation. On the road we passed gangs of coolies carrying hoes or mattocks and wearing wide-brimmed bamboo hats. The road was busy with pedestrians coming and going between the hills and Dimapur, and a stream of military traffic was going to and from Kohima - mule trains, trucks, ambulances, jeeps.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

On sale in the bazaar were the usual objects: coral beads, boxes of matches, bits of coconut, dal, and rice; there was turmeric, spice, and chillies laid out in little bowls with ginger, fruits and nuts, and, crawling over everything, myriads of flies. Shaving soap was Rs.1-8-0 a stick (2 shillings and 3 pence in English money). There were tobacco leaves, and betel for chewing, the red juice spread out on green leaves with white dabs of lime. I enjoyed the bazaar. The day was hot and sweat poured off me but I liked the smells, and the look of the people. I felt that I should like to come back one day.

Most interesting were the Nagas who had come down from the mountains. They were stocky folk, a rich chocolate colour, with black hair worn long or cut in 'pudding-basin' style. They had great muscular calves and thighs, almond eyes and chubby faces; although we were very interested in them they looked through us as though we did not exist. They wore black blankets with red, gold, white and green stripes along the edge. The men wore a black cloth band round the leg just below the knee, and often a gold bangle as well. They had necklaces of bright red beads and some wore scarlet scarves. On their backs they carried bamboo wicker baskets, using head straps. Their faces were full of life, the men grave, the boys ready to smile back, and the girls attractive to look at. They were wild wary creatures at home in that savage country; they would tolerate our passage and still be there with the rain and the jungle when the brief disturbance we caused had passed.

The Nagas were the happiest looking folk I had seen. The Indians I encountered often had a depressed downcast look in spite of their festivities and dancing; perhaps they thought too much;

'If you are of an enquiring mind it is difficult to be happy' as Guggenheim used to say.

I had a steady stream of visitors at the dispensary: cadgers, grouzers and sometimes men who just wanted conversation or wanted to show me a new bird or beast in which they thought I might be interested. A pair of small finch-like birds nested in a shrub at the dispensary door: spotted munias - they were slender, with red heads and with bodies spotted in shades of brown that gave them the nickname 'nutmeg grater'.

Mac the lieutenant QM came one morning and began, 'I've been in the army all my life, Charles, and I know the form about these things.' I knew the form too by then: he was after my store of brandy (known as medical comforts). He had a fearful Irish temper which exploded suddenly and blew over as quickly; then he was all smiles. He liked 'literature' and especially admired Shakespeare, Hardy, Milton and the Bible ('Foine English it is, though mind you I'm not religious at all at all'). I never caught him reading any of them.

When the Stores Jemadar called, his object after telling me how well I was liked and many other things, was to get quinine from me, for quinine was in short supply and could be sold. He tried to ingratiate himself by passing on natural history notes, 'Sahib, look, very bad snake in tree; he make noise at night.'

'But it's got legs, Jemadar Sahib.'

'Oh yes, Sahib, snake have got legs'

The only snake killed in camp that was brought to me was small, about two feet long, and had pairs of narrow rings all the way down its body. I thought it might be a krait which would indeed have been 'very bad' but its head was too crushed for me to be sure. The IOR who brought it said it was 'very bad snake', but I never came across a snake that was not 'very bad' to the uneducated.

When Jemadar Shukardin came, it was to complain that he was being blamed for the slackness of his havildars (Indian sergeants) and he gave a life-like imitation of the 'bahut sust havildar' (the very lazy havildar), his hat anyhow, his belt askew, his posture slouching. If anyone was to blame it must surely have been the Jemadar, but Shukardin was young and inexperienced and I was not at all sure how he had got himself promoted - there was much graft and bribery with which we, the British officers, were not linguistically equipped to deal.

The BORs complained too, and sometimes I felt that my job was to be a sponge that mopped up everybody's grouse, and that the grousing cured them. One BOR took me to see a red squirrel; it was small and quite unlike the tree-rats of India, but stole bread from the BOR's kitchen. Another brought me a furry brown spider two and a half inches long and half an inch wide. Yet another brought an insect

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

like a grasshopper, about 2½ ins long; when its wings were closed over its back it looked like a piece of bark. Various sizes and colours of what I would have called stick insects were common; they resembled praying mantis except that they were smaller and camouflaged to be drably inconspicuous.

Insects were always attracted to our dinner table by the powerful light of the Petromax lamps we used. Praying mantis 3 ins long (2ins of body and 1 in. of neck) landed often on the tablecloth and their dancing and gesticulating antics distracted us from our usual occupation of scooping from the soup the discarded wings of flying ants (so-called 'monsoon flies').

One evening after a five course dinner made from whatever our cook could find in the rations we sat out under the stars in deck chairs, smoking long thin cigars from Madras and watching the fireflies against the black night. We were suddenly roused by hearing on the radio the word 'Dimapur': it was, it seemed, a 'remote railhead in a jungle hell'. I asked Don how many of the listeners, he thought, knew what a tiny collection of miserable shacks Dimapur was. 'And how many of them,' he said rather grandly 'know that WE are here and have just had a five course dinner with brandy and cigars?'

We listened to the radio on most nights:-

On the 6th June, lying in bed at 21.30 I listened to news from London - 'Landings in Normandy!' The announcement affected us all profoundly. At last the end was in sight; personal problems appeared in a different light and we wondered if any of our friends were now in the thick of it in Normandy. On the 16th June we heard: 'Japanese mainland bombed yesterday by land-based aircraft', another milestone.

And on the 29th as light relief, we heard on a Japanese-controlled English-language broadcast from Saigon that 'Nothing could now stop the victorious march on Delhi of our triumphant Japanese armies.' And we knew that it was a week since the road from Dimapur to Imphal had finally been cleared of Japs by the 2nd British and 5th Indian Divisions: any threat to Delhi was over. On another night I tuned in by chance to a German radio programme and heard the

Brandenburg Concerto No.5; it did not come through very well but it was utterly transporting.

The BBC was right about the climate. After one day of very little mental or physical exertion, I was so tired in the evening that I let a barber shave me; he had come to cut my hair and moved on to do my face, brandishing his razor before I could stop him. I usually shaved myself with a cut-throat because new blades for safety razors were hard to get, and I made a fetish of a sharp razor and clean shave -it seemed to change a dull and dreary round into something interesting, something to look forward to. Work, examining patients and doling out pills, that was merely a smooth-running tedious machine; there was no scope there for perfection or enjoyment - all that mattered was that it be done.'

We had a particularly violent electric storm one night. First the wind whirled a few sheets of metal and an old tarpaulin through the camp; then came the first drops of rain, the crash of a chair blown over, and the first clear blue startling flashes of lightning. We hurried to rescue our possessions; Don got his gramophone into his basha and I took down my mosquito net which was flapping like a loose-footed sail. I dragged my bed into Don's basha and lay down. Don had put on a record from Peer Gynt. The storm, he said, took him back to last year in the Arakan.

'The company I was with had gone forward leaving my section behind; they did not come back before dark, and I can't tell you what it's like waiting in a storm in the dark for you don't know what.'

It rained steadily, fiercely. I was writing by the light of a hurricane lamp and could see the blue light of the flashes through the basha walls. Looking through a window opening I thought, absurdly, of thunderstorms in the cinema; how inadequate they were! In between flashes I could still see on my retina the images of another basha and of a great tree against the sky. Then the whole place was brilliantly lit again and the tree and basha were momentary black silhouettes. Rain streaked across the fleeting visions. I had never known such brilliant, frequent flashes of lightning and such sudden crashes of thunder as in those storms at Dimapur. They seemed to be

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

all about us, and the rain drummed loudly on the ground, steady and unceasing.

The morning was lovely - a welcome refreshing wind, the sky clear, and great white clouds in the distance; my bed after the storm was soaked. Thunderstorms were frequent after the beginning of May and the heat became more and more oppressive in June and July; the air was still and heavy except after rain; the moist heat sapped our energy and we grew ill-tempered. From the time we came to Dimapur until the middle of July the minimum temperature was never below 75 degrees F and there were nights in mid June when the minimum temperature was 97 degrees. Humidity varied from 75% to 98%, and 98% humidity was not uncommon. When I dissolved Carboic crystals in water early in the morning to make Calamine lotion, the drops of moisture that condensed on the outside of the beaker ran down the glass and made a pool on the table.

Terry usually came in to breakfast saying loudly 'Hello, Charlie, old boy', and clapping me on the shoulder. I muttered ungraciously 'Hello, Terry', and he sat down and yelled 'Koi hai' 'Anyone there?' to an invisible waiter. When I tried to read he wanted to talk; he paused only to grimace at the waiter and haughtily wave away food that he had just ordered, and I listened unwillingly to a monologue on how he made someone a smart reply, and got the better of someone else. Terry the Eurasian had Congress sympathies; he would, I thought, find his people a good deal more hardly treated in an independent India than in British India.

Don came to breakfast from the wards saying 'Pretty warm today,' adding quickly, 'But nothing like the Arakan, of course.'

At the dispensary I lost my temper with the bhisti (water carrier), a charming old man with a large drooping moustache. I was exasperated at nine in the morning by lassitude, by my poor Urdu and by apparently deliberate stupidity. I seemed with everyone to have to be saying to myself 'Don't shout at him, don't strike him' and I remembered Kurup's complacent self-praise - 'But I do not hit the patients'.

I was watching a golden oriole one morning when Sgt Smith (Smudger), who was not very observant, came to the dispensary and

remarked ‘No birds around here, Sir, like there is at home. Just drab sparrows and things.’ He must have been feeling the heat, for a moment later he exclaimed in front of a harmless little sepoy, ‘Christ, I hate this chap!’ I was evidently showing my feelings too, for Smudger remarked, ‘It sounds as though you are busy, Sir, from the way you said “And what do you want?”’ I was getting intolerant of interruption. In the Mess I could hear Bill Gleed,

‘Don’t be a bloody fool, Don - I tell you, the North Staffs are not bloody soldiers at all; now the Gloucesters - you know why they have two cap badges?’

Later they moved on to pacifists and I remembered the pressures put on me as a boy and the embarrassment of being taken by my family to listen to the pacifist George Lansbury, a man I did not find sympathetic. I had known plenty of pacifists, and most of them had dropped their pacifism at once when war began; I did not want to get into a discussion started by Don with the words,

‘Of course, 95% of all Conscientious Objectors are just trying to get out of it.’

To change the subject I quoted corporal Odell who did a lot of building jobs in camp, and had said about the building firm he ran before the war,

‘We ‘ad a labourer, Sir, and ‘e was working like a nigger - at least not really like a nigger, Sir, ‘cos they don’t work....’, but John Wakeford came in punctually as usual at a quarter to eight, took his gin and lime from the barman, and courteously put an immediate stop to our fatuous talk. He had few prejudices, and prejudices about colour and pacifists were not among them.

Early in June Kurup returned from home leave and we had a celebration; he had brought chairs for the Mess from Calcutta, big orange-fleshed bananas from Malabar and a fruit cake with sugar and almond icing cooked by his mother for Terry’s birthday. There was very heavy rain in the evening and for the party we moved into the marquee tent which Hari Shankar had laid out nicely with flowers in whisky bottles. There was plenty to drink at Dimapur - we could get all the rum and Carew’s gin we wanted; only whisky and beer were

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

rationed. When the bottle of whisky a month did come it was Canadian rye for which I developed a lasting dislike. Mukerji, who suffered from moodiness, sent a message that he did not intend to come to the party, and Kurup, always good-natured, said,

‘Oh he is silly fellow’ and added with a broad smile, ‘So he has buttered his bread, so he must lie on it. Is it not?’

I had many talks with Mukerji later. He had a comfortable philosophy:

‘It is not sin until your conscience tells you so’

‘You do not sin when you conform to your surroundings, whatever you do’

‘Religion is one thing, life another.’

In the hot weather I finally lost my temper with him. He had failed to turn up one day for a Health Inspection of the IORs and when they were paraded again next day he was once more absent. I found him in bed pretending that the job was for me to do. As the men were waiting I did it and then gave him a piece of my mind. When I told Mac he grunted, ‘I’d have marched them into his bedroom.’

Another argument with Mukerji began when he announced that Sodium Salicylate ‘toned up the liver cells.’

‘What evidence is there that it “tones up the liver cells”?’

‘It’s in the book.’

‘Yes, I know, but the book may be wrong. What is the evidence for what is in the book?’

‘What do you mean, evidence? Pharmacopeia says it.’ I was dumbfounded and laughed at him. My medical school had bred scepticism about this sort of thing.

One day we heard him happily singing in Bengali and asked him to translate the song,

‘Bengal, the Queen of countries, the lovely mother - Where the bees sleep on the flowers after sucking the honey - Country of dreams.’

I had to go to Cawnpore shortly afterwards and when I came back I was told that he had gone mad and been removed.

*

Sometimes I stood out under trees in the moonlight and watched the silent flickering of lightning in the clouds to the north, wondering how to order my life and find a reason for it. It seemed more important to do this than anything else, more important than work or love. I thought it might help me to straighten my ideas if I saw something of the mountain wilderness to the north. Even at Dimapur man was too correct and orderly a being.

*

Convalescents who had recovered enough to walk used a large tent as a Mess; there were chairs and trestle tables and they had meals there and played Housey-housey; occasionally on fine nights there were film shows under the stars. Vera Lynn came to see us; she did a great deal of good by going round and talking to the men. She wore a wide-brimmed bush hat, bush shirt and slacks; she was dressed in khaki, not olive green like the rest of us. She spent time in the convalescent men's tent and her visit was treasured. I suppose she sang but I did not remember it. Just seeing her and hearing her speak was enough to make us imagine all sorts of things.

The 12th June was our hottest day yet. In the small ward for those especially ill was a man with a temperature of 106.5 degrees. Sgt Smith saw to it that he had a proper bed to lie on and was sponged down at intervals. The unhappy man gave a very good picture of what bad malaria could look like - tremendous rigors, the temperature going up and up and up, the copious sweating which lowered the fever a little, then more shivering and the fever rising once more until there was clouding of consciousness and delirium; we gave him intravenous quinine. When we looked at the blood slides we found the parasites of malignant tertian malaria, 'damn bad feevah'.

*

Normally any excuse to be away from Dimapur for a few days would have been welcome, but not when I was ordered to India to attend a Court of Inquiry into a death that happened when I was there.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

One of the patients died while undergoing what should have been a comparatively simple operation. I was taking a specimen of marrow from his breastbone when he collapsed and, in less than a minute, died. I told John Wakeford the story; he ordered Bill Gleed to fix me a flight from Jorhat to Delhi and then turned to me, 'Tell them about it like you told me, and don't worry. You were doing your best.'

I went by rail to Jorhat and was given a lift to Delhi in an American supply plane; I had never flown before. I sat on a heap of sacks in the empty fuselage where I could look out of a window on the starboard side.

We left Jorhat after dawn and soon I was admiring an enormous mass of snow-white cumulus cloud to the north. As time passed it began to look less like cloud, and I realised that I was looking at a gigantic range of mountains. I had never seen anything like it. I took out a note book and made a sketch which I afterwards recognised as the outline of Kangchenjunga, Kabru and Jannu.

At Cawnpore a lieutenant colonel and two other officers sat at a bare table. I saluted and was invited to sit on a chair in front of them. The colonel made a note of some details like my name and rank and suggested that I should give an account of what had happened. Before I could begin, one of the others said something to him and for a moment they whispered together. The colonel then turned back to me and asked if I should not like to have some other officer present. I did not like this development: I looked at him and said,

'What is this? Am I accused of something?'

His answer, 'Not yet,' failed to put me at ease but I told him that I saw no need for anyone else to be present.

'All right then, you had better give your own account of the whole thing.'

Cawnpore was uncomfortably hot in July; we were all sweating and mopping our faces and necks with handkerchiefs. I remember fixing my gaze on a fly that buzzed about the colonel's nose as I told the story:

‘The patient had been ill for a long time and we had been unable to make a diagnosis or decide on treatment. We needed to look at a bit of bone marrow under a microscope and in getting the specimen from his breast-bone my needle had gone too deep and had scratched the surface of his heart - only a scratch, maybe, but we knew afterwards that there had been a tear and a haemorrhage into the sac in which the heart lies. Yes, the needle was unprotected, but it was the only kind we had in that hospital.

‘Yes, I had done that sort of thing before, but using safe needles with a short bevel and a safety collar; it certainly could be done with an ordinary needle if necessary. Yes, I had had to push to reach the marrow in the breast-bone, and yes, the push had gone that little bit too far. Yes, every precaution had been taken except to transfer the patient somewhere where they had the proper tools.’

So we went on - question, answer and question until my tale was told and they called the next witness. He was a doctor who had suggested that there was no need for a Post Mortem examination: I was glad now that I had disagreed with him. We should never have known the truth without that anxious hour of searching in the dead man’s body.

Before I left the Court of Inquiry I found that my ‘account of what had happened’ had become a ‘Witness’s Statement’ and been typed out for me to sign. After several days, during which I was advised not to leave Cawnpore, the Court decided that there had been a ‘misadventure’, and that no one was guilty of negligence.

*

A Brigadier Crosbie, RAMC (DDMS 33 Corps) came in unobtrusively one day to look round and have a talk with John Wakeford. We hoped they were discussing a move forward from Dimapur and into the hills.

The CO called me over next day and said that he was going for the day to Kohima; would I like to go? We started at 1130 in a 15-cwt truck; I was so excited that I might have been at home, and going once more for a day in the hills. In the distance there were hills

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

everywhere, clouds clinging to them in long streaks. Wakeford sat in front with the driver and I sat in the open back of the truck.

First we went through a jungly gorge, then there was a long climb of 5,000 feet, the road twisting and turning along steep hillsides. Landslides were frequent and in one place we came across a bulldozer pushing debris over into the steep drop on the outer side of the road. Above and below the road there was thick jungle except where there had been landslips; now and then, hundreds of feet down, I could see wrecked 3-tonners whose drivers had gone over the edge; the road was busy with trucks and mule trains. Gangs of coolies from tea gardens were at work with picks, mattocks and shovels, clearing, making places to pass and repairing damage where slips had taken place. For most of the way we were in the lower gears, the driver steadily winding the steering wheel as we rounded bend after bend. After 3,000 feet we reached an undulating plateau where there were clearings. The traffic was heavy - mainly 15-cwt trucks - and all along the road Nagas were coming and going. At the side of the road were camps for the coolies who were working there.

If I had known more then about the battle of Kohima I should have looked about me with more care. The rutted muddy road wound along ridges with steep earth banks on one side and drops on the other; there were slit trenches, old strong points and the tumbledown remains of bunkers, all empty now. Shattered tree trunks, blasted by mortar bombs and shellfire, bare of branches and leaves, stood against the sky. West of the road were the remains of shelled buildings, Garrison Hill, a scene of devastation.

8 IMFTU had set up camp east of the road. Near the various hutments which made up the 'native village' stood a neat bungalow with a corrugated iron roof painted red. Somehow it had escaped serious damage. The small garden of roses and bougainvillea was almost intact. We were given tea by a Sikh MO; refreshed by a cool breeze we looked out over the Jessami track to the complicated hills and valleys which opened to the south east.

On the way back I lay in the rear of the truck looking at one ridge after another as they hid the turns of the road. We ran into a heavy thunderstorm and stopped to put up the hood, taking it down again

when the rain was past. For the last few miles I lay watching the sky, which had cleared after the storm; the clouds were pale blue and salmon pink, and Jupiter was visible before we reached Dimapur.

At the beginning of September Terry and I went with Kurup to a 'South Indian dinner' in the Travancore lines - rice, of course, but coconut chutney, something called 'Idaly', red stuff called 'sambha' which took the skin off my tongue, and little red balls of fried meat, ladies' fingers, papar and ground coconut. The meal was washed down with sweet milky coffee. All joined in and overate, grossly, and the atmosphere was fun and laughter. I was told that in polite society you kept your left hand in your lap, and ate with the right. I had to admit that I had not noticed the IORs doing so. Finally our host (Kurup) stood on his head and explained that this was 'Yoga.' 'It is' he said 'most difficult one', and as he had a full stomach and stayed upside down for a full minute, or perhaps two, I believed him.

*

On the 8th September we loaded 7 IMFTU into 3-ton trucks; the work took all day and it was nightfall when the last lorries moved off one by one and disappeared up the road into the blackness.

My last memories of Dimapur early next morning are to do with birds - a chestnut-bellied nuthatch, flights of dusky crag-martins flying low, and groups of the nests of weaver birds hanging from trees.



Chapter 10 The Central Front

The road climbed 5,000 feet from Dimapur to Kohima, 46 miles away, the administrative headquarters of the Naga Hills where, before the war, were a 'native village', a Deputy Commissioner's bungalow, and some administrative and military buildings. South of Kohima the road climbed nearly another 1,000 feet before beginning the descent of 3 to 4,000 feet into the Imphal plain, which was surrounded on all sides by mountains; before the battles for Imphal the mountains had been covered in jungle to their summits. The little collection of villages that made up Imphal, 130 miles from Dimapur, was given strategic importance in 1944 by its geographical position between Burma and India.

From Imphal a bridle-path ran south-east over the mountains to the village of Tamu on the India-Burma frontier. Tamu was at the head of the Kabaw Valley, separated from the river Chindwin to the east by a range of low hills. The Tamu track was used by most of those who fled from Burma in 1942.

Another track, longer and rougher than that to Tamu, ran south from Imphal through the Chin Hills to a tiny village called Tiddim, 162 miles away in Burma. This was the route followed later by 7 IMFTU.

*

In 1943-4 the three Indian Divisions of 4 Corps occupied the country described: the 23rd Division was at Imphal, the 20th was near Tamu and the 17th Light Division was at Tiddim. Except for some small outposts east of Kohima and north east of Imphal the other troops in the area were non-combatant. A General Hospital had been

brought to Imphal itself and various L of C (Line of Communication) units were stationed between Dimapur and Imphal.

A good deal of time and labour were devoted in 1943 to improving the road from Dimapur, but communications by land were generally difficult in the mountains; communications by air were slightly easier, for by 1944 there were five landing strips at Imphal; only two of these, however, could be used during the rainy season.

Early in 1944 the Japanese began an offensive from the south-east and east, threatening the Imphal plain and its supply line from India via Dimapur. To meet the threat all available major units were withdrawn towards Imphal and formed a defensive ring round the plain; small outlying units were withdrawn to guard the road at Kohima, and the British 2nd Division was brought into Assam.

Before the end of March the battle of Sangshak mentioned earlier had been fought, an important but forgotten battle in which the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade, with no previous experience of battle, delayed the advance of a Japanese division for five vital days.

Meanwhile, to strengthen the defence of Imphal, Slim flew the 5th Indian Division from Arakan - guns, jeeps, mules and all; two brigades of the division went direct to Imphal and one (known as 'Daddy' Warren's) went to Dimapur; that brigade included the 1st Battalion of the Royal West Kents which was immediately to distinguish itself at the siege of Kohima. Slim further reinforced the Central Front by bringing the British 2nd Division from India. When Warren's brigade had raised the siege of Kohima it was the British 2nd Division that took over the battle and cleared the Japanese from the road south.

When 5 and 7 IMFTUs settled in at Dimapur in mid April the battles for the Imphal plain were at their height and that for Kohima, which began on the night of 3rd April, had reached a crucial stage: the small garrison had withstood close and fierce attack for two and a half weeks and was near the end of its endurance. Relief came on 20th April, but although the danger of the Japanese descending on Assam and Dimapur was removed, it was not until two months later that the enemy was cleared from the road to Imphal and troops of the British 2nd Division met troops of the 5th Indian Division advancing north.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

To the east and south of the Imphal plain the defenders held their positions from spring to summer and all the Japanese attempts to break into the ring were beaten.

After July the exceptional rains of 1944 turned dripping hillsides into quagmires and tracks became runnels of mud and clay. The enemy was in retreat, short of supplies, and weakened by disease and starvation. Slim harried him with an army that did not halt for the monsoon, but chased him east to Tamu and the Kabaw valley, and south through the Chin hills to Tiddim and Kalemmyo.

Before the war Tiddim had been an outpost of a district of Burma; it consisted of a few dwellings with red tin roofs among scattered hamlets in remote mountainous country; it was approached from Burma by a pack trail that wound up from Kalemmyo through towering forests of magnificent teak. The trail had some historic interest for on it was the site of Fort White, named after Sir George White, VC, defender of Ladysmith. As a young brigadier in Burma he had earned the thanks of the Government of India for 'putting down the dacoits and pacifying the country'. If the story is true he must be the only man ever to have done this to Burma, before or since.

Tiddim and the trail from Kalemmyo and Fort White over Kennedy Peak became important in 1944 when the Japanese chose it as one route to Manipur; they drove north from Tiddim over the formidable Manipur river while 17th Indian Light Division which had been occupying the Chin hills withdrew in haste and with great difficulty to join in the defence of Imphal. The Japanese advance from the south was halted by troops of 4 Corps at Bishenpur on the southern rim of the Imphal plain and the defeated enemy was forced back the way he had come.

To clear the Chin hills Slim chose the 5th Indian Division which had already fought the Axis in Eritrea and the Western Desert and had faced the Japanese in Arakan.

To meet the special circumstances created by the season and the nature of the country a number of units not normally under divisional command were attached to the division; amongst these, seconded from 33 Corps, were 7 IMFTU and a Casualty Clearing Station. By the beginning of September the 5th Indian Division had advanced 40

miles from the Imphal plain along the Tiddim road and won command of the mountains and jungles on either side.

*

The main natural obstacle on the way to Tiddim was the Manipur river. The river rises in the Imphal plain and flows south until it is about 126 miles from Imphal and 36 miles from Tiddim. Here it bends to the right to run roughly west for half a mile before turning south again. At the bends it is already a big river, wide and swift. The road south from Imphal at first lies west of the river, which is on the driver's left; it reaches the river at mile 126, where traffic must cross the river before climbing to Tiddim. After the crossing the river is on the driver's right. There was once a substantial bridge at the crossing but 17th Indian Light Division destroyed it during their retreat in 1944 and although the Japanese must have put up some sort of bridge for their own use they did not leave it intact, and the crossing was a serious obstacle. After the 5th Indian Division crossed the river communication with Imphal by land was cut off and all supplies came by airdrop.

The later course of the Manipur river is south and east through the Chin hills to form the Myittha river which flows into the Chindwin at Kalewa. The greater part of the 162 miles from Imphal at 2,000 ft to Tiddim at 5,600 ft. was fit only for 'fair-weather' travel; with the passage of a division in the monsoon it became a muddy, deeply rutted scar on which even four-wheel drive vehicles were constantly skidding and slipping; they advanced in crab like fashion, all wheels turning all the time and the front wheels usually pointing in at an angle to the hillside.



Chapter 11 The Tiddim Road

On 9th September Terry and I started for Imphal at daybreak. I climbed into the cab of the 15 cwt Chev and sat with the driver; Terry and his batman got in behind and lay on the baggage. A train was standing at Dimapur railway station and as we drove past we heard a shout. It was Naik (Corporal) Sita Ram, returned from leave. He threw his gear into the back of the truck and climbed in after it. He and Terry began to converse in fluent Hindi.

After the first few miles on the flat the road began to climb, one hairpin bend after another. Always on one side there was the steep rising slope and on the other a precipitous drop. There were landslides and places where lorries were stuck, and at short intervals there were gangs of coolies with picks and spades. Now and then we were held up while a bull-dozer pushed the debris of a landslip over the edge, and from time to time we saw the remains of crashed lorries, usually 3 tonners, upside down on the hillside far below. After Kohima we climbed for another thousand feet to the highest point on the road, about 5,500 ft. We passed groups of Nagas wearing wide hats made of bamboo and leaves; the men had grass capes and the women and children carried bamboo baskets on their backs. As we passed they withdrew to the roadside and stood immobile like statues. It rained heavily most of the way, and I smoked Woodbines one after another. Near the highest point we stopped to eat a tin of salmon and drink tea out of a thermos flask.

In the Imphal plain at 2,000 ft the country was more open; the road crossed shallow stony streams flanked by grass and trees - the country looked more like home than anything I had yet seen in the

East; but the grass was coarse and more yellow than green, and the woods were wild and tangled. Here and there were patches of brighter green, the fresh young paddy. We reached Imphal an hour before dark and camped on an airfield that was out of use because of the monsoon. We had come 135 miles in under ten hours - good going.

The CO, with Bill Gleed and Wallace Park arrived later and we all settled for the night in a corner of a large tent. Before turning in I walked to a plank bridge over a clear tumbling stream; how completely different from Dimapur it was! Small hills, cool breezes and fast little streams. The night was comfortable except for the biting of mosquitoes; even through nets the mosquitoes of Imphal had sudden stabbing bites that one did not forget. I was up early and the first thing I did was to go up the highest of a ring of hills near camp. Conifers and elephant grass grew on top, and the lower slopes were covered with scrub. I made my way by a small ravine and from the top, where I found the remains of a strongpoint and trenches, I could see the whole Imphal plain; we were not far from the centre of it. On the descent I found a slope of steep scree down which I could run, and to go up and down the hill took only an hour and a half.

We stayed at Imphal only to be sure that the unit was together before starting along the Tiddim road in the wake of 5th Indian Division.

The CO and I left at 0800 on the 11th September with two of the office clerks, Muthu Krishnan and Ram Chandar. At first, in the Imphal plain, the road was good. We passed an all-weather (tar macadam) airfield and came to the village at the south end of the plain where one of the notable battles of the siege of Imphal had taken place - Bishenpur. After mile 30 (the miles were marked with wooden posts) the road began to deteriorate as it climbed into the mountains; we passed wrecked tanks, Japanese remains and the burnt-out wrecks of lorries. We admired the engineers who had made the road: we did not know what was yet to come. We churned slowly through mud, all four wheels spinning in deep ruts; at mile 43 we stopped for a break and had lunch. We entered Burma at mile 75, but except for the map we should not have known it. Small white crosses marked our soldiers' graves and an occasional Jap skull grinned at us from the side of the track where some joker had stuck it on a post. At mile 80.5,

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

near the tents of a Field Ambulance, we stopped to set up our own camp. The site was in partly cleared jungle near a bend in a pleasant stream about 20 yards broad; the water was clear and deep enough for swimming and I went in at once to wash off the dust of the journey; there was a lot of dust.

We had taken the whole day; around us now were decomposing Japanese dead, unexploded grenades, discarded clips of ammunition, and flies in abundance. On the far side of the road, not fifty yards away, an abandoned ammunition dump was on fire.

We were going to be at milestone 80.5 for the next two and a half weeks, to the end of September. It rained heavily all the first day but a part of our convoy of trucks arrived before nightfall: we could put up tents and begin to take in patients. Several British patients appeared and with a hurricane lamp in my hand and a gas cape over my head I went across the camp to attend to them. On the way back to the Mess in the dark and rain I fell into a hole full of mud and reached the mess tent in no mood to be told that the cooks had gone to bed. Terry had been out to see sick Indian troops and the two of us ate what we could find in tins in the deserted cookhouse.

Bill Gleed in the meantime was stuck a long way back on the road with several 3-tonners; he passed the night in the cab of one of the lorries and turned up 24 hours later.

I found at this camp that I had far too much personal baggage in the way of books and camp gear for the life that we were to lead. I was able to send much of it back by a lorry returning empty to Imphal; there it would be looked after by Don who was staying at Imphal in charge of what was called our 'rear echelon'.

New patients came in all day and the British section was soon full; I sat by the river with one of them, a gunner from the Royal Artillery, and asked him,

'Where would you like to go for leave?'

'Well, I've been to Ranikhet, Sir, and its dull there - Cal would be better; but I'd give two weeks leave anywhere else for a week-end at home.'

He had been with 5th Indian Division in the desert before Alamein and later in Persia and Arakan. I asked him what he would do if he had a free choice of leave,

‘London.’

Heavy and continuous rain fell day and night; the river where I liked to swim each morning became a torrent sweeping violently downstream into a noisy gorge; tree trunks, petrol tins and all sorts of rubbish came down it. Engineers farther along the road were trying to rig a cable ferry over the Manipur river, and in one night measured a rise of three feet in river level and an increase in the rate of the current to 16 knots.

One morning I found Sadheo sitting in a corner of my tent smoking ganja (Indian hemp) and when I told him to get along back to ‘the lines’ he said that if he went he would be made to help pitch tents. As he had done a good morning’s work for me I let him stay where he was, out of the rain. At lunch Bill Gleed announced that as I had been a year in the army I was now a captain: he had received formal notice of the fact. The announcement was greeted with enthusiasm by all because it was an excuse for a party and the QM was expected to provide the means of celebrating - we had all long since finished the month’s ration of drink. Mac later privately passed me a bottle of Canadian Club (the only whisky supplied us at that time) and with the addition of rum we had a good evening.

Next day I went up one of the hills above camp; it was honeycombed with bunkers in which were Japanese sandals, tin hats and water bottles, and a litter of corncobs gnawed down to the wood. I met two Chins on my walk and was sorry that we had no common language. Their bearing and the way they looked through me as if I were not there gave me a chastening feeling of being a mere object like a stone or tree in the landscape. They had broader shorter dahs than the Nagas and to carry the panniers on their backs they used plaited headropes; these passed through holes in yokes made of polished red-brown wood that looked like mahogany. Above the holes the ropes were knotted so that the yoke took some of the weight off the forehead. On the way back I stopped by a mound at the side of the track, idly stirring it with the toe of my boot; I exposed a number of

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

bodies, scraps of uniform and toothy Jap skulls; the bones were yellowed, the eye sockets huge.

Down by the river at dusk that evening I saw a 'flying fox' glide off a 60 foot tree. Reddish brown in colour and about 2 feet 6 inches long, it must have been a bat of some kind.

Malaria could strike very quickly; on the 20th September I recorded that a British soldier lost consciousness at 1300 and was dead at 1530. He had his first symptoms the previous day and in the morning was outwardly no different from many other patients. Wallace Parke and I wondered if his death could be from some other cause than malaria and I did a post mortem examination in a small tent: we had the necessary tools in our stores. When I took off the top of the skull I found the brain very much congested with blood and when we looked at sections we found the brain full of malaria parasites. There was no sign of any other cause of death.

On the 26th September a Casualty Clearing Station arrived and set up camp near us, complete with specialists, operating theatre, nurses, pet dogs, everything; some of them joined us as guests for dinner. Our mess tent was pitched on a steep slope and during meals Bill and Mac were in the habit of sharing a wooden bench which ran along the side of the tent that was over the slope to the river. That night at dinner we turned on the radio to hear the news and were surprised to hear a tribute paid to the Indian Army. Bill had had a drink or two with our guests and struggled to his feet to wave his glass in acknowledgment; when he sat heavily down he and Mac disappeared backwards with a noise of splintering wood - out of the tent and into the dark. We helped them back to the table and when the guests had gone finished what the QM said was the last of the spirits. Next night, when I joined the sergeants for a beer, a bottle of rum appeared; the label said 'Lime Juice' and Sgt Smith murmured 'Funny that - the QM must have overlooked it, Sir.'

About this time there was some question about taking nursing sisters any farther. After crossing the Manipur river the road back would be allowed to fall into disrepair; we should be cut off behind and supplied only by airdrop. Some people remembered the capture of a Main Dressing Station in Arakan when the Japs had murdered the

staff and patients. They did not think any girls should go on but so many volunteered that it was difficult to leave even one behind.

The CCS had on the staff a young doctor who fancied himself as a psychiatrist. His name was Klein. He joined us for dinner one evening and after a silence suddenly turned to me and asked,

‘Do you like painting, Evans?’

When I cautiously answered ‘Yes’ he immediately asked, ‘What?’

‘Oh, not modern stuff.’ ‘You disappoint me.’

He wanted me to know that he made a study of the Pre-Raphaelites and Post-Impressionists, and of Surrealism. I told him that I liked well drawn pictures of subjects I could recognise and added for good measure that I liked to read Milton. He sniffed a bit and moved on to music - Debussy and Sibelius. Somehow he seemed familiar, but we had not met: it was the opinions and phrases that were boringly familiar,

‘Any single man over 40 has a fundamental psychological defect.’

‘All Indians, you know, have complexes which make them aggressive.’

‘Mountaineering? A thwarted desire, of course, to get above your fellows.’ I demurred and he retreated,

‘Oh, my dear chap, don’t think I meant to be personal.’

He could make nothing, he said, of Colonel Wakeford; it occurred to me that John Wakeford thoroughly understood Klein.

We talked over the dinner table by the dismal light of a hurricane lamp while the rain made a drumming noise on the ground. When Klein had gone Bill Gleed turned to me and asked,

‘What is he, Charles?’

‘A psychiatrist.’

‘Oh, does that mean he goes round weighing everything you say and summing you up all the time?’

‘Something like that’ I said.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

‘Well, I summed him up pretty quick, I can tell you, and it wasn’t much to his advantage.’

In the last week of September we had orders to pack and be ready to move; soon there were no patients and we had time on our hands. The river level had fallen and I tried fishing but although I had the right gear, proper hooks and fishing line, I caught nothing, whereas our Indian cook regularly caught fish for our meals with a bent pin and a piece of cotton. I saw snakes now and then at the pool, either swimming or on the stones by the water; as far as I knew they were harmless. Chestnut-headed bee-eaters with bright plumage perched in the trees. Behind in every direction were the dark green hills.

Half the unit, including the CO and the QM, now left to go farther along the road while I stayed with Bill Gleed, Kurup and various NCOs. I fetched my revolver and got Bill to dig out a rifle. After I had found out that I was not much good with the revolver I got Bill to show me over the rifle; it was the ordinary Lee-Enfield .303 and as I was accustomed to sporting guns I had no difficulty with it when we started target shooting.

From that time Bill Gleed and Smudger Smith and I struck up friendships that were to last as long as we were together. There was a surprising amount of drink in the sergeants’ tents and I began to see that Bill’s relations with the NCOs were on a much more intimate footing than Mac’s had been; it was at Smudger’s invitation that Bill and I went to the sergeants’ Mess that night to finish what was left of the QM’s whisky.

A Field Park Company of Indian Engineers was camped two miles up the road, and next evening a sergeant called Barney came in a jeep to fetch us to a party with them. He was a tall slim Cockney with a pleasant face which twisted to one side when he smiled. Two of our sergeants, Vedmore and Edwards, piled in with Smudger, Bill and me. We bucketed along two miles of the road. The rain had stopped and the sky cleared; there was a crescent moon and bright stars. The engineers fed us on fresh chicken from a Chin village followed by peaches out of a tin; then, round a fire in the open, we played a simplified version of Poker called Brag till the small hours. The stakes were small and I won a few rupees but Bill, I noticed, was

winning steadily all evening. On the radio we heard news of Arnheim and my companions resented the publicity given it. 'Arnheim' they said, 'What about the poor buggers who fought at Kohima?' We had a noisy, crazy drive back, shouting and singing to the empty jungle on either side. In camp next morning I gashed my eyebrow on the back of a chair and went across to the CCS to have the cut stitched; this was done by a pleasant Bengali, a surgical specialist.

We moved on the 1st October, travelling in convoy. First we followed a river at the bottom of a deep gorge; then, traversing steep crumbling slopes, we climbed the side of the gorge to a saddle. We then followed a high ridge with distant views of cloud and mountain before plunging dizzily down hairpin bends into the next gorge. The road was just passable, one mile per gallon, six to 20 miles per day, depending on landslips and other obstructions like stranded vehicles. I rode with Smudger and two others in the back of a three-ton truck, lying on folded tents. After coming up one particularly steep and precipitous hillside where the track wound in and out of small ravines, we halted at a point where the road rounded a sharp edge and to one side there was a great drop. Because of either the height or, more likely, fumes in the covered truck, we had splitting headaches and felt dizzy. Smudger and a havildar clerk called Malachi got out and were violently sick; Sadheo, who was travelling with us, sat in the back of the truck unwilling to come out - he held his head in his hands and moved it slowly from side to side. It was near noon and blazing hot; I got out of the truck to bandage the septic hand of an engineer lieutenant who was standing by the roadside, and I passed out. I remembered the fight to keep on bandaging though my hands were fumbling, the spasm of fear, 'Christ! Is it MT (Malignant Tertian malaria)?', then the glorious cool surrender as I was carried to the roadside. At that moment I was coming round and I told someone to put me with my head down. He covered my face from the sun and in a few minutes I was all right. At last we got to milestone 100 and stopped for the night - 20 miles. Very good going, we were told.

The moon that night was full and the sky clear. 'Moon over Burma' said Bill, who liked quotations of that kind, 'and to think, Charles, that the same dear old moon...'

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

During the day we had had glorious views of sun and mist on distant ranges. At milestone 87 the road climbed across a particularly steep slope where tarpaulins were draped above and below to stabilise the soil. That bit of road was known as 'The Ladder' and the track there was no more than a narrow ledge cut along the side of a mountain of mud and shale. The trucks always looked as if they were on the point of going over the edge: in fact, many had gone over - 'Cor bloody 'ell' said Cpl Cook, 'Look at that Dodge; looks as if somebody'd got 'old of it an' twisted it.'

We went on in the morning at 0900 and made good progress with no long halts; we reached milestone 126 at 1700. For two or three miles Smudger and I walked ahead of the convoy, and felt the better for doing so. We saw many remains: mules and men, and stores, mud, chains, upturned trucks. Riding was a bumpy business as the trucks jolted from pothole to pothole; if you sat with the driver you clung with both hands to a bar that ran across the dashboard; if you were in the back lying on the baggage you were jerked all the time up and down and from side to side.

In pouring rain we arrived at a clearing near the Manipur river crossing. When summoned we started the engines and brought the trucks down to the river bank, but a queue of vehicles waiting their turn to get on the ferry held us up and we were ordered back to the clearing. After considerable manoeuvring and turning of lorries in mud and rain, we tumbled at nightfall into the backs of the trucks, ate what food we could find in semidarkness, and went to sleep. At 0400 we were roused and woke the drivers; Kurup was silent, asleep in the cabin of his lorry. In the moonlight I drove my lorry down myself.

The river was 110 yards wide at the ferry and engineers had rigged a 3-ins steel cable from bank to bank. A large block ran on the cable and to it were fixed wire ropes that held a raft made of wooden planks on steel pontoons. The raft was big enough to take two trucks at a time. Progress over the river was partly by hauling from the far bank but also by slewing the raft as it lay across the current in such a way that the current was used to push it to the far side.

We found the advance party of 7 IMFTU camped on the far bank where the road began to climb a long hill, and in the afternoon I went

back over the ferry on foot for news of some of our trucks which had not arrived. The delay was because they had had to wait their turn to get on the raft; a lorry driving onto the raft had jolted a truck already there and bumped it forward until its front end overhung the water. The engineers pulled it back a couple of feet and lashed it in place. As I returned over the river I saw from the raft that the body of a dead elephant carried down by the current had stuck on some rocks in midstream. The current there was very swift and strong, and above and below the crossing there were fierce rapids.

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Listening next morning to All-India Radio we heard, 'And now - Over to London.' The voice changed: 'This is London calling in the Eastern Service and General Forces Programme of the BBC. Here is the news and this is Someone-or-other reading it: Troops of the 5th Indian Division continuing their advance along the Tee-dim Road (They always pronounced Tiddim, Tee-dim) have reached a point on the south bank of the Manipur River. This news comes to you from the BBC, London.' Bill Gleed, outside the tent and trying to shave in a mirror hanging from a sapling, continued the commentary. 'This point is fly ridden. I'm sorry, I'll read that again. Here is the latest communiqué from SEAC Headquarters. Cor, Charles, these flies are bloody awful. You have to keep running-on- the-spot out here all the bleeding time.' He was stripped to the waist and his big white belly jerked up and down as he leapt and danced in front of the mirror. The site had been used by a mule transport company before we came and the flies were as bad as I had seen anywhere. We were there a week.

I went for a walk the first afternoon and noticed many skeletons. High up overlooking the river was a machine-gun post manned by a section of Jats sepoy under a British lieutenant. He gave me a mug of their sweet milky tea and we sat on the edge of a trench, looking at his map. The valley at our feet was 2,000 ft below, and his post was at 4,000 ft, not far from a DZ or supply dropping point. I followed a mule track for about 500 feet to a narrow ridge where there were a few pine trees, short stunted hardwoods and coarse grass not more than a foot high. I met Chin villagers, stocky men with muscular calves and children carrying enormous loads. They had been scavenging at the Dropping Zone (DZ) for bits of rope, tins, parachute material and any

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

cigarettes the NCO in charge might give them for helping to move heavy boxes. I could see a wide blue sky, cloud-shadows on distant hills, and dark green hillsides below. A hawk circled around and I saw flocks of small birds with bright red bodies and black heads flying from tree to tree - scarlet minivets. Below the top of the hill was an abandoned Jap camp with all the squalor of defeat - stained dressings in wicker baskets, eating utensils, bits of clothing and everywhere the gnawed remnants of corncobs.

QMS Vedmore, with whom Bill and I had spent hours playing cards at mile 80.5, looked in at the camp by the river on his way home on repatriation; he was extremely talkative and became more so every minute as we plied him with drink to celebrate his good fortune: he had been six or seven years in the far East. We were a convivial party and as Kurup, who had not been able to get out of earshot, said next morning, 'Oh what is it all, my Gawd, last night I was suffocated with the swearing language.'

Terry and I took a 15-cwt Dodge truck to the DZ at mile 138, where during a drop one had to be alert to escape the fate of an Indian soldier who saw a sack of rice on its way down ('free drop') and ran to take it in his arms. We collected mail for the unit, and the rum ration. With our other rations were cases of tinned 'self-heating soup' for the whole division. As the soup was Oxtail and many of the troops in the division were Hindu, the tins came in the end to units like 7 IMFTU where they were a treat for the British. In each tin was a chemical heater which was lit by putting a match to a wick; a few minutes later the soup was ready and scalding hot, the very thing for troops who were wet and cold and must not light fires.

Here I met for the first time the American Field Service (AFS).

'Hi! I'm Danny James, AFS. Guess I'll be bringing you some sick.'

He showed me how to drive his jeep ambulance: I was delighted with this extraordinary toy - forwards, backwards, two-wheel, four-wheel, high ratio, low ratio; there was nowhere I did not think I could go. Danny came to supper and told me about the AFS. He was a big man, open in manner, modest and unassuming, kind and unselfish. He had had a varied life. He came originally from California but had

lived also in New England. He had been to sea as an 'oiler' or stoker, been on convoys to Murmansk and been torpedoed. He was paid 60 rupees a month (about £5 in those days). The AFS men's only luxury was access to the American PX, a superior version of our NAAFI canteens, but there was no PX on the Tiddim Road. The AFS men were for one reason or another not fit enough to be in the American Services. Of those I knew one had asthma, another (Danny) had had polio, another had had broken legs that had not been properly set, and so on; without exception they were the sort of men who would go anywhere and do anything if it helped. The ones I got to know drove 'Jeep Ambulances', jeeps fitted with frames to carry stretchers. They seemed indifferent to enemy fire and would put their jeeps at the steepest and roughest ground; they made a major contribution to the survival of our sick and wounded and I was to see more of them later.

From the Manipur river the 5th Indian Division fought its way past Tiddim, Kennedy Peak and Fort White to Kalemryo in the Burma plain, and there joined up with the 11th East African Division which had come down the Kabaw Valley. We were supplied entirely by air, and in mountain terrain too steep for landing that meant that everything came either by free drop or by parachute, and at first nothing could be flown to India - no mail, for example, and no casualties. Casualties had to wait for evacuation until we reached a place where we could level a strip for a light plane to land, a plane able to take a stretcher and a couple of sitting patients. The job of dropping supplies in those mountains went on through the monsoon and was done by Dakotas of the Royal Air Force. Many years later I came by accident to know some of the pilots and navigators of those aeroplanes and we were able to compare notes about the dropping zones we had both known, they from the air and I from the ground.

When we moved on from milestone 126 the road was dry and the going good. I left with a section that was to open for patients at milestone 144. I should have Bill Gleed, Kurup and several NCOs with me. 7 IMFTU's lorries had been sent back to Imphal, and we were taken forward by a Motor Transport Company allotted to us for the move. The MTCs used 15-cwt 4-wheel drive Dodge trucks. The drivers were all Pathans from the North West Frontier - fine looking men with hook noses, shiny black hair and striking blue eyes. South

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

of Imphal the main rivers and mountain ridges ran north and south; the road ran along the hillsides except where at intervals it climbed to cross from one valley to another. By midday we had reached milestone 138 and the convoy halted on a high ridge. To the west the ground fell precipitously; the slope facing us was about 3,000 feet from top to bottom, and covered with jungle except where a rare clearing showed the presence of a village. Immediately below me was the wreck of a Jap tank and I wondered that they had driven tanks along this road and back again. Japanese remains lay in abandoned bunkers and I had to admire what they had accomplished in the face of so much privation.

From farther on, near two wrecked Jap tanks, I could see south to Tiddim; distant outlines looked bare but all the near hills were jungle covered except where the Chins had cleared small patches to grow rice or maize. As we came along the road I had a feeling remembered from the Alps: the drop below, tricky holds, and 'sticky' bits that one is glad to have passed, a feeling of no let-up. That is what it was like - driving on that road. The wheels had to keep turning and turning so that you did not lose ground that you had gained so hardly.

When the convoy stopped for a long halt the drivers gathered by my truck, and I tried to talk with them; their Urdu, about which they were modest, was far better than mine. They said that their country (Waziristan) was very like the Chin hills except that there was not much vegetation. They told me that at home they lived chiefly on maize and for sweetening used gur not sugar. When at home the driver of my particular truck worked on his farm or at making roads. He carried a Sten gun in addition to the .303 Lee Enfield that was part of the truck's equipment; seeing my interest he gave me a practical lesson on how to use the Sten. He was, he said, a Mahsud and his name was Gulam Kader. He was very proud of his own country where he had six wives and was 'able to rest'. He had joined the army to get better food and clothing; he told me that if I took paper and pencil and wrote down everything he told me I could learn Pushtoo from him in one month. He offered me a chew of tobacco and asked me if my home was Japan. I found his tobacco hot but without flavour; it made the saliva flow.

We reached mile 144 at 1330, and when the rest of the section turned up we pitched camp.

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The road at mile 144 was in a deep valley, and once more close to the Manipur river; the view was enclosed except back to the north where in the distance we could see a conspicuous mountain with a double summit. By the camp a clear stream with pools and small waterfalls came tumbling out of the jungle, and to rise for a cold sponge in that stream contrasted gratefully with waking at Dimapur, sweaty and tired, to bathe in a basin of warm water. When I went to the stream at morning and evening I usually saw a dipper with a white front like those at home - the ordinary Indian dipper was chocolate brown all over.

On the first day I walked back to a dropping zone at mile 142 for some of the thickly padded cushions used when making a parachute drop to break the fall of containers whose contents were fragile. They made comfortable garden seats in camp. The road to the DZ followed the usual steep sort of hillside. Across the valley I could see huts and patches of what looked like standing corn; the scene was enticing but the Manipur river there was full and violent, and ran down fierce rapids; there was not even a bamboo rope bridge and it was hopeless to think of crossing.

When we were at Dimapur we had been visited by the CO of an infantry battalion; he came to see if any of his men were patients at 7 IMFTU; Donald Gunn who had come out with me on the *Ranchi* was with him as Regimental MO and I had told John Wakeford afterwards how much a part of me wished I were doing that sort of job. It was natural to want to be more dramatically mixed up in what was going on than we were. At mile 144 we could hear the guns and had been told that a battalion of Dogras was even then attacking Tiddim. Bill, at 43, was like an old war horse; he had found a Jap rifle and some ammunition, and now he got them out for us to do more target shooting. However much he derided the army, he was at heart still a sergeant major in the Gloucesters longing to be more active. Two officers from the West Yorks called one evening to ask if we were satisfied with the arrangements for our defence; it had not occurred to

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

us that there was anything to defend us against and we had no complaint that we knew of, but Bill said,

‘Defence, eh? Things are looking up, Charles.’

We felled trees to make space for the big tents for patients. Until patients began to come in there was little to do but someone brought a bag of mail from the DZ and news that another bag had been lost - ‘fell in the river’; there was an outcry of ‘It must have been mine’. I personally did well by the mail drops; letters and books came regularly and from the time we left India few parcels went astray. In the evenings we got out a gramophone (‘welfare’) from Sgt Smith’s stores. Smudger had records of all sorts of things including Agnus Dei and Ave Maria. We sat under trees in the open and one by one he produced his favourites: ‘I like this song, Sir; Jeegly and some orchestra it is, conducted by Winkler or some fucker.’ It was a beautiful aria and when I stole a look at him I saw tears in his eyes.

With a barrel and some planks we made a table which served, with our makeshift garden seat, as an open-air Mess. We entertained two sergeants from a Field Ambulance and played Pontoon with them by the light of a pressure lamp. I had never played Pontoon but in spite of that won 78 rupees (about £6). I decided that the game must be mainly luck and that I should do better to stick to Poker. Bill and I had a suspicion that some officers regarded us as not quite ‘pukka’ - ‘fraternizing with the men’ and all that. But I had no doubts about my relationship with the men. If, to be an officer, you had to stand on privilege you had no business to be there.

On the 13th October I painted a signpost saying what we were - 7 IMFTU, and stuck it by the roadside. That afternoon we were in business and began to take in patients. They were brought in day and night and we pumped everyone from up the road for news of the battle for Tiddim; there was nothing much to hear. One patient handed me his ‘jungle ration’ and Smudger and I sampled it - compressed tea, milk from a tube like a toothpaste tube, a little jam and a little cheese - no wonder he handed it in. On the 15th October the CO appeared, accompanied by the division’s Assistant Director of Medical Services (ADMS) a full colonel; they said that progress farther up the road was slow and we must be ready to take up to 200 patients. Bill and I sat

outside that evening with Staff Sgt Edwards and Smudger. I had seen a lot of patients during the day and was glad to sit down. Kurup as usual was in his tent.

I was beginning to be a bit disenchanted with Kurup; his constant and weary 'Oh, my Gawd' was getting on my nerves and his helplessness irritated me - when shaving, for instance, he stood before the mirror with his hand out waiting for his batman to put his razor in it, and at table he waited for the batman to rinse his mug and bring it from his tent to his hand. We had been too much together. I took too much notice of his shy Indian prudishness and the little knickers never discarded. Bill believed that if he were abandoned on the road he would 'just bloody well sit down and wait for starvation to reach him'.

The 16th October was the festival of Dewali when Indians hang up lights to celebrate the end of the monsoon and worship Lakshmi, goddess of the earth and of wealth, making up also their accounts for the year. By a fluke the divisional engineers had wired us that day for electric light from a generator somewhere back along the road and so, as well as lights from hurricane lamps hanging in trees, we now had the blaze of electric bulbs. Nammu Singh asked me if Division would tomorrow be taking down the bulbs and removing the wires and I had to explain that XIVth Army had not brought us electric light solely for Dewali. We were given a party that night at the Indian lines; there was rum and an enormous feast of rice with curried fish, and puris (fried chapattis), followed by a large kind of jelebi, a sort of sweet, and fresh pineapples. The IORs then came to our Mess with singers and a dancer, a boss-eyed sweeper; he danced to a drummer who used an empty tin for a drum. I hated it because no one took any notice of them, and they were doing their best; it was not a very good best, but the Indian singing was moving. The poor dancing sweeper was terribly short-winded and had to give up in the middle of the show. When we turned in at 2030 rain was pouring down as it had not done for several days.

Conditions were primitive in the 'wards'. Many of the patients needed saline by intravenous drip, and we sterilised the syringes and other equipment by boiling over an open fire or Primus stove. The actual setting up of drips was often at night; it meant first kneeling in mud at the side of the stretcher while you tried to get a hurricane lamp

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

to shine enough light on the spot where you were trying to put a needle exactly in a vein. The nursing staff of IOR orderlies was wretchedly inadequate and mostly inefficient. Things would have been better if we could have bathed the patients, cooled them, cleaned their mouths and made them drink. On the night of 18th October an Indian soldier was carried in vomiting and so very ill that I immediately took a specimen of blood to look for parasites; I told the stretcher bearers meanwhile to go to the ward with him. Half an hour later when I went to the ward I found that they had simply dumped him fully clothed face down on the ground between two stretchers: thoughtless, callous and stupid was what I thought them, as well as bone idle. The BORs fared rather better with Smudger and a couple of NCOs to run their ward.

19th October. We took in many cases of scrub typhus at this time and I thought that three of the worst of the British ones might just pull through. The IOR wards were pretty grim if you let yourself think about it: the stretchers crowded together, and the stench from unwashed, dehydrated bodies and dirty clothing. We had many typhus cases for whom we could do little; their moans did not mean pain but that they were very ill. They had sores and ulcers round their mouths; their mouths were dry and dirty, their cheeks hollow and their lips blue; they had a blotchy purplish rash, and all the time I heard 'Bahut kamzori, Sahib, bahut taklif' - Much weakness, much trouble.

On the 20th we were lent a Nursing Sister who came up early and stayed late and did a tremendous amount to transform the look of the place. I wish I remembered her name and whether she was pretty or not, and whether we talked at all; but no, all I noticed was that when she came the place looked like a slum, and when she went it had almost begun to look like a corner of a hospital ward. That night, after she had gone, one IOR died of typhus and one BOR of my own staff was taken ill with severe abdominal pain.

The previous day had been my birthday and in the morning Smudger said 'Salaam, Doctor Sahib, I would sing you a song if I felt like it' and Bill, who overheard, broke in with,

'It takes a man, Sergeant, to sing in the morning'.

We were coping now as best we could with large numbers of Indian patients - what a poor lot they seemed! They started 'moaning and groaning' as soon as one came in sight. Some were genuinely very ill and suffered greatly under these conditions, but many were just unwilling to return to duty or to admit that they were a little better. The Dogras and Gurkhas made the best patients, I thought, then the Jats; the rest not so good. I began to sleep badly, thinking about the cases we had in.

On the 22nd I meant to take a half day off but in fact had a very busy day seeing a lot of new cases and setting up intravenous drips; a picture of doing the same thing in the sophisticated surroundings of a modern hospital, helped by a neat and efficient sister, came to my mind - and now I was doing it in a tent by the light of a hurricane lamp, helped by a half taught sepoy. Kurup seemed quite incapable when confronted by such things and so I was putting up the drips on his patients. He worried dreadfully ('Oh my Gawd') and would not take any responsibility, least of all for British patients. He was Orderly Medical Officer last night and when a BOR was brought in and one of our own staff was having a lot of pain with renal colic he had to come to me for advice instead of himself looking after the two of them.

A few days later I had two BORs who were very ill indeed; both were deaf and looked blue. One drank 14 pints of water during the night, and the other, I thought, was going to die. When I knelt by him and asked how things were he said he was 'a bit cheesed off' with the drip, the needle in his arm. On a later round of the ward I asked him again how he felt (a meaningless question - I just wanted to be company for him) and he said 'Not too fucking grand, Sir.' I could have cried if I hadn't been to Shrewsbury School. Next night another BOR was brought in with a note to say that he had 'collapsed'; he was jaundiced and had pain in the abdomen. I decided to 'keep him under observation', thinking that he would come to no great harm. I felt bad myself most of the day; the weather lately had been hotter again, exhaustingly so.

The next afternoon a Hindu died and I watched the IORs burn him. They used a tremendous amount of wood, several tins of kerosene and ghi (clarified butter) and five gallons of petrol. One of

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

them ran to the pyre and lit a match, nearly cremating himself in the 'whoof' with which the petrol went up. They made a great 'jolly' of the whole thing and it seemed a good party. When it was over the remains were flung down the hillside in hopes that some bits would reach the Manipur river, which flows eventually into the Irrawaddy. I wondered if they thought it flowed into the Ganges. Perhaps it did not matter.

In the evening one of my BORs died. I thought the others might recover if left alone, but I feared that to take them several thousand feet up to Tiddim (which by then had been captured) might be fatal. Smudger called me in the night to attend to a transfusion that was not working; it was a clear cool night with shooting stars, and a crescent moon setting on the edge of a hill. Smudger helped me and we sat out afterwards in the small hours, eating bread and cheese, and drinking mugs of tea. On the 25th October the padre of the Royal West Kents, a good man, came down, and just before lunch we buried a soldier who died the previous day. It was a simple and moving ceremony: the figures at the grave, the noise of the torrent below, bright sun, blue cloudless sky, the dark greenery of jungle-clad hills all around and the quiet voice of the padre speaking of everlasting life, of dust to dust, and of salvation through Christ.

It was more dignified than the Indians' ceremony of the day before when they all rushed round with petrol drums and tins of cooking oil. I did not believe any of it, but the old familiar words gave comfort.

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During the last days of October the main part of the unit leap-frogged us and went on to open on the far side of Tiddim. Work was slack again and we renewed our acquaintance with the engineers' Field Park Company; they were only five miles away, near a bridge they had built over a tributary stream called the Beltang Lui and we made a habit of walking to their place in the evenings; we wound in and out of side valleys, up and up until we were hundreds of feet above the Manipur river. The moon was half full in a clear starry sky; the valley with steep black hills in shadow on either side and the silvery stream far below was beautiful. We pounded along in gym

shoes with our coats open, the brown of our skins showing darker in moonlight than the faded green of our trousers. Ronnie Fulton, the lieutenant in charge of the Field Park Company, was a slim, dark, vital Scot, a collector of Japanese flags, and owner of a black Wiltshire terrier called 'Scruff'. Ronnie usually brought us back to our camp at a reckless pace by jeep and we sat there in deck chairs until after midnight, talking about careers, about medicine and engineering.

Soon my section moved on to join the rest of 7 IMFTU on the far side of Tiddim.

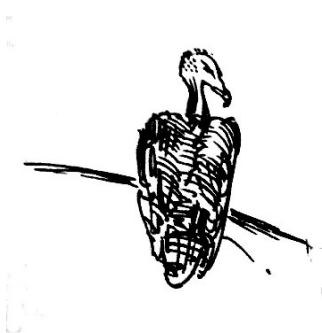
Tents and gear were loaded on the trucks of a Transport Company at dawn and the convoy moved at 0800. I could hear the Manipur river thundering in the gorge on our right as we retraced the course of our moonlight walk of the night before; in morning mist and early sunshine there was magic about the deep remote valley in the middle of wild mountains.

The going was straightforward for the first five miles to the Beltang Lui which we crossed by a small Bailey bridge; then the road began to climb 'The Chocolate Staircase', a tour de force of road-building that went up 3,000 ft in seven miles of zig-zag.

There were fourteen hairpin bends in the first two miles and the whole track up to just under 5,000ft was carved out of a clayey soil the colour of milk chocolate; at the worst parts tarpaulins, as on 'The Ladder', were draped on the slope below the road to lessen the likelihood of slips. The 4-wheel-drive trucks went in low gears, wheels turning faster than the trucks advanced up the slope. After the thirtieth hairpin at mile 157 the slope eased where we reached the crest of a narrow ridge at 5,000 ft. East of us the ground fell to the tangle of valleys and ridges from which the waters of the Beltang Lui flowed. To the west a thickly wooded slope fell to the Manipur river 3,500 feet below and only three miles away. Tiddim was five miles on and only 700 ft higher; the road became less steep and after passing through what remained of Tiddim village we reached our camp at 6,000 ft. We were among pines and I lay on my back in the sun with my eyes closed, smelling the pines and hearing the wind in the branches, tasting the joy of being on a high place.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

Life on the road had been made up of mud and dust, of long halts between movement, of mule trains, tanks, ambulances, convoys of trucks like our own, and jeeps on all kinds of business. The white crosses and the Jap skulls perched on sticks were as much part of the scene as the roadmenders and the statuesque Nagas and Chins; they were as familiar as the dropping zones with their discarded baskets and parachutes, as the burst sacks of flour and the supply planes droning overhead; there were cooking fires, piles of chapattis and the smells of curry; there was everywhere a feeling of pressing on, of being 'in it'. There was a great tendency to decorate and to pick up trophies - flags, kukris, Jap weapons. As we went along we met men of every race and religion - Pathans, Nepalese, Sikhs, Punjabis, South Indians. I remembered how, as we climbed the long dry spur of a hill in convoy one day we met a jeep bouncing and sliding down in the opposite direction: British officers and their servants going on leave or repatriation. The jeep was piled high with Jap flags, rifles, revolvers, swords, and the young officers with blond moustaches were gaily dressed - a medal ribbon or two, colourful scarves, jaunty hats and suede shoes with crêpe soles - I could see them still, and remembered how dull and pedestrian we had felt.



Chapter 12 Tiddim

That first evening at Tiddim I found pale blue orchids growing in a fork of a pine tree. The air was cool and invigorating, the scene breathtaking. The sun set behind dark hills covered by long pale clouds above which the sky was clear. I slept with one blanket over me and it was nothing like enough. I got up at dawn to stand on the edge of a bomb crater and look out over the valleys to the east at far ridges catching the sun. The sky beyond was pale and watery, blue, grey and pink. I could hear a very faint distant cockcrow.

In the afternoon I walked a short way back down the ridge to the remains of a bungalow; there was a lawn, a rose border, juniper, geraniums and chrysanthemums, convolvulus, and a white gate that led nowhere and was in no hedge, no fence. Cpl Odell, the big man who did building jobs for us, had come with me; he was doing some plumbing in camp and was looking for bits of iron pipe and perhaps a tap or two. When we got back to camp the chill of late afternoon, a slight mistiness, the grey light and the tang of smoke from a wood fire reminded me of autumns at home.

As we looked east from camp we saw the summit ridge of Kennedy Peak, 8,871 feet, running roughly north to south across our front. From camp the road climbed on for 12 miles to the left, or north, end of that ridge and disappeared from view at a place called Vital Corner. The road there turned sharply right to run south for a few miles on the far side of Kennedy Peak. The Japs had not yet been dislodged from Vital Corner or Kennedy Peak and as usual they were very well dug in. We watched day after day as our aeroplanes bombed their positions on the ridge. The Hurribombers roared over us and seconds later the whole skyline at which we were looking erupted in

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

flame and smoke. There was a stiff battle for Vital Corner but the escape of the Japanese to the south-east was soon threatened by encircling columns which had already reached the road farther on, near Fort White. On the 3rd November the last Japs left Kennedy Peak and by the 4th our troops had taken their place.

On the very crest of the ridge at Tiddim was an old bunker, an unroofed hole about three feet deep and big enough for my camp bed, my tin trunk and a steel ammunition box in which I kept books. To keep me warm I roofed the bunker with a tarpaulin and the QM christened it Plynlmmon Palace. Plynlmmon Palace was at 6,000 feet, with the Manipur river at the front door, 4,500 feet down; across the valley was a range of hills from 6,000 to 8,000 feet high, labelled on our maps 'fairly dense mixed jungle'. In places I could see clearings and villages. Only one of the hills had a name - Hlang Tang Mual - and it was by no means the highest. Immediately below my bunker Sadheo had cut an earth ledge and here he lit the fire to heat water in tin cans for my early morning tea and my evening bath. I took my bath in the open, and could watch the sun set over the western mountains. Some yards away along the ridge was the Mess, a tent in which was a Sigri, a heater made of a 40-gal oil drum round the bottom of which we punched holes. In the evening we lit a fire in the drum to burn the fir cones that were plentiful on the ground. The glowing fire gave out a great deal of heat; we had drinks and meals there and sat round the Sigri when our own tents were cold.

The Chins came often to look for treasures like empty tins, food and cigarettes. They had a slinking springy gait which made nothing of the slopes below camp, they smoked pipes and wore their hair long, almost to the shoulders. The men wore a garment like a skirt which ended half way down the thigh. On their backs they carried bamboo baskets held by the usual headstrap whose cords were knotted above the holes at the sides of a wooden yoke. One old man came up the hill below camp to beg rice. He moved steadily and without a sound. He spoke a little Urdu and we were able to converse in a simple way. I had an idea of coming here on leave one day to camp and roam about the villages, living off the country, but he made it clear that I should have difficulty in finding food. He carried a goblet made of a beautifully polished red-brown wood like mahogany; it was the size of

a Jaffa orange but oval in shape and I took it to be a hookah of some kind - there was water inside and it stank of stale tobacco; he did not show me how it was used.

The work at Tiddim was light compared with that during the monsoon at Dimapur and back along the Tiddim road. Although the patients were often very sick they were few in number and the wards were never full. We had brought some patients with us from mile 144; they were not yet well enough to return to their units and at that time we had no means of evacuating them to a base hospital. A few new patients with either malaria or typhus began to come in; some of them were unconscious or dehydrated and had to be fed intravenously. Wallace Parke and I between us looked after the BORs, and Terry and the Indian doctors took care of the IORs. Every few days I acted as Orderly MO, almost a non-job except one morning when we had a surprise visit from the Deputy Director of Medical Services, 33 Corps, the same Brigadier Crosbie who had visited us at Dimapur. In our small world the DDMS was a bit of a swell. He took no notice of my sloppy dress and according to my diary I thought him 'a decent old chap' (he must have been all of 45). Bill Gleed said afterwards,

'Charles wore a hat for the Brigadier: the Army Commander would probably rate a shirt as well.'

Crosbie brought with him a lieut colonel who was just out from home and talked a lot about large scale evacuation of casualties from France by air. I wondered if he knew that Ronnie Fulton was then trying to level a landing strip for an L5 in the jungle near Saizang almost 3.000 feet below us.

On the 7th November I walked down the road through Tiddim to our 'waterpoint' from which water was brought to the IMFTU by water cart. All that was left of the village was two brick houses and a collection of about 30 shacks with red tin roofs. All had been smashed to a greater or less extent and the Chins I found sitting there seemed to be deliberating about rebuilding. There was an abundance of flowers - violet and red convolvulus, pink and white roses, bougainvillea and a great deal of mint in flower. At the water point I found some Indian engineers. I had become curious about hemp and hemp-smoking and as grasses grew thick about the waterpoint I asked the Indians if they

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

could show me hemp growing wild. There were a lot of grins and sly remarks about my only wanting it to smoke myself but they found some for me.

When the new landing strip was finished I went there with a patient in a jeep ambulance; it was a lovely drive along a track that only a jeep could have used. The little aeroplanes used for flying out patients were called L5s, and took one stretcher and two sitting cases. It was our only way of sending serious cases to hospital. We feared that some convalescents from typhus may have died as a result of flying out like this: typhus affected the heart and for some patients the strain of being flown over the mountains at 10,000 feet may have been too much. Ronnie Fulton was in charge at the air strip and I accepted his offer of a lift back. We saw wooden carvings by the track, and posts decorated with horned heads; one of the carved posts was in memory of a chief of Saizang, the village by the airfield. Ronnie pointed to another village so high and remote that he called it Shangri La: it was Vangte, where Franklyn of 'V' Force had operated a radio transmitter throughout the Japanese occupation. Ronnie was a romantic and on the way back he stopped his jeep to greet a striking looking Chin whom Ronnie said was a man on whose head the Japs during the occupation had set a great price.

On another day I walked down to a village called Lamzang, following a cliffside path that dipped down at intervals to cross a stream with cool shady rock pools. The distance down was about 2,000 feet, a good deal farther than I had guessed. The sun was warm but now and then a cool refreshing air swayed the tops of the pines. I was surprised at the steepness of the slope. On the way I found lavender, a patch of corn and an aromatic herb called Artemisia, with leaves like chrysanthemum.

I passed what I took to be Chin graveyards and lower down stopped on a little knoll above the village. The voices of children floated up to me, and women's voices, and the low-toned sound of cow-bells that reminded me of Switzerland. The village had looked romantic from a distance but I was disappointed. The single grassy street had bashas of bamboo and grass on either side; everything was on a slant, and the bashas were held up by stilts on the outer side of the slope of the hill. All around were banana trees and stacked corncobs.

The bashas were dark and bare inside; I saw a few women and children, and one old man who sat on a floor made of wood planks raised off the ground. In another hut an old woman was weaving. The bashes and the plots where they stood were surrounded by wooden palisades, and outside, on posts, were the skulls of deer and of Mithun a buffalo or bison peculiar to this part of the world.

On the approach to Lamzang I passed wooden posts bearing carvings of elephant, deer, rhino, leopard and pig. Some of the posts were broad like a plank; a Chin told me that the carvings were the site of a graveyard.

I sat down to sketch the face of a little boy and a crowd of children gathered. When the drawing was finished there was general interest and laughter; I gave the sketch to the sitter and I was forgotten while the children crowded round him to look. When I recovered from laughing I asked the owner of the picture in Urdu,

‘Is it all right?’

He grinned and very shyly whispered ‘Thik’ - ‘All right.’

As I was watching a basket-maker in Lamzang some aeroplanes flew overhead and started a hubbub of talk, some of which was directed towards me; after listening to their words for some time I made out an often-repeated phrase that sounded a bit like ‘Fighter escort’ and saw that the hut walls of at least this Shangri La were covered with drawings of twin-engined supply planes and fighter bombers.

On the path near the village I had been joined by a young man and when we came into the village I saw with him a girl of about 19; she was not perhaps attractive by our standards but she had lovely eyes and limbs, and fine black hair, long and lustrous. She addressed her companion in a low musical voice.

The birds at Tiddim were easier to see than those in the thick jungle lower down. I had no book about Indian birds with me until later, when I acquired two that were excellent: Salim Ali’s *Birds of the Indian Hills* and Whistler’s *Popular Handbook of Indian Birds*. My binoculars froze at night when there was cloud and in the mornings it was always a little while before they warmed up and I could focus

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

them. I wrote down descriptions of the birds' colouring and sometimes made sketches from which I was able later to identify jays, nuthatch, scarlet minivet cocks and their orange coloured hens, woodpeckers, a hoopoe. and a black and white bird like a magpie with a red bill; it had a call like iron screeching against iron and was probably a tree-pie. There was a variety of small hawks, tits and other little birds which I was never able to identify, and a black and white soaring bird which I took at first to be an eagle, but which I decided after looking at it through the glasses was probably some variety of vulture. In a wooded ravine I tracked down an elusive bird with a very sweet song, the 'Whistling Schoolboy', not unlike our blackbird in appearance.

Ronnie had moved his company from the Beltang Lui to a place on the road that went towards Vital Corner and at night Smudger and I often walked the three miles to see him. The road wound on and up, white in moonlight; our footsteps were silent in the soft dry dust and we could hear crickets everywhere; pines showed against the sky - up and up.

At Ronnie's we did not always only feast and drink and play cards; he liked to fantasize about his past. He was about my age, very dark, and lean; he said he had 'a brilliant brain' but had been obliged to leave Cambridge after, so I understood, breaking his tutor's jaw in a fight (he said he had, or was it had almost had, a blue for boxing); I did not find out why he fought his tutor but one night he showed me a very large photograph of a most lovely girl and said, after reverently putting it away,

'That's what I'm fighting for.' I reflected that I had no such romantic reason for being where I was and wondered what reason I should have given if asked - some instinct perhaps for preserving the kind of order in which I had been brought up.

Ronnie was always ready with news from up the road and Bill and I liked to question him; he would expound freely on 'defensive positions' and other military matters. His superiors were with him one night, a lieutenant colonel and two majors, all thoroughly drunk. One of them had cousins in the ICS for whom he did not have a good word - 'fuckpigs' was the most friendly - 'benevolent, benign, blue-nosed f-

pigs'. A heated argument developed between them about the merits of 'Jat Sikhs' and 'Musbi Sikhs', whatever they might be, but cooled when we were served an enormous meal - jam puffs, sultana puffs, rum, mint cake, a fritter with mint leaves and potatoes, tomato soup, bread, cheese and chutney made of the rinds of limes. The conversation moved from the wickedness of their cousins to the merits of a scheme by which the engineers encouraged Chins to kill Japs by making for them poles on which to stick the heads of any Japs they caught.

On another night Ronnie looked in on me and said,

'I'm going down to mile 150 to pick up some hose pipe. Would you like to come?'

I would go on any outings like that and I climbed into the jeep. He had a very good and intelligent NCO with him, a Naik who was always known as '51', the last two digits of his army number. '51' sat in the back with Scruff, Ronnie's Wiltshire terrier in his arms. It was a beautiful starlit night and the air grew perceptibly warmer as we went down 2,000 ft. Everywhere was deserted and quiet after the passage of the division; our destination was a water point by a wrecked Japanese tank, and on the way Ronnie stopped at the grave of a friend, a Lieutenant, RE called Lane, who had driven his jeep over one of 17th Division's mines which had been dug up and replanted by the Japanese.

When Smudger and I went up to Ronnie's on our last evening at Tiddim we found him in bed with malaria; I dosed him and we enjoyed a quieter evening together than was usual in his restless company.

At dawn I heard once more the long drawn out crow of cockerels from villages far below; the sounds floated across the valleys, the only sounds in the stillness of morning. Heard on the high ridges, lit one after another by the circling sun, the sound went round the world for ever, as dawn came to each ridge in turn.

I did not look forward to the prospect of going down to the heat of the Burma plain.

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MANDALAY AND BEYOND

Terry and I left Tiddim in convoy at daybreak on the 14th November. To Vital Corner the track wound along a crest, sometimes in sun, sometimes in shadow. On the right we looked down to the Saizang airstrip and up to Kennedy Peak and on the left we looked back to Tiddim and down the Chocolate Staircase. After Vital Corner the track followed a hillside covered with dense jungle like that at Dimapur: big trees, luxuriant creepers. In places the trees were broken, stripped of foliage, and uprooted, and the ground was scarred with bomb craters and the remains of strongpoints and dugouts. Near the summit of Kennedy Peak (8,871 feet) the jungle was so devastated that there was very little left to obstruct the view south-east to the lower hills, to Fort White and Burma. The valleys were filled with billowing cloud that looked solid, and was brilliantly white against the empty blue sky. Sitting in front with the driver was like being on some high-level scenic tour of Switzerland without the snow.

At Fort White we turned off right along the track to Falam to look for a camp site. Below camp there was dank jungle with mosses and ferns where in the first half-hour I found five different kinds of orchid in flower; they grew on stumpy trees within fifty yards of my tent. Above us were bare grassy hills, gently curved but steep; the grass was six to twelve inches long and grew in a thin soil over rock. Terry and I climbed the nearest of the hills and from it saw down to the level plain of Burma; in the distance a great serpent of river gleamed here and there between streamers of cloud.

We thought that the camp, at about 7,500 feet, was likely to be our highest, so we raided the medical comforts for a bottle of Champagne to celebrate. The night was cold and I was up before dawn. I climbed a grassy knoll to get warm and came on a platoon of Dogras just crawling out of their bivouacs. There was a thin layer of frost on the ground and they shivered with cold. The main range stretched north and south. To the west was the big depression of the Manipur river and beyond were more peaks rising to 8,000 feet and more. To the north Kennedy Peak showed clear where the road cut across it. To the east the country fell with only here and there a sharp hill at the end of some ridge that came off the main range.

The plain was covered by low dense white cloud through which two lesser ranges emerged like long reefs from the sea; they ran north

and south. The sky above the horizon was full of changing colour. Then, in a nick of the farthest hills, an arc of the sun suddenly showed, red and bright and growing in size as I watched. I had a feeling of the earth's turning, of this immense blue and rosy plain with its mists and rivers, its jungles and paddy fields, moving with unbelievable speed towards the sun, of myself at the edge, as I was, of the ball of the earth where the sun's light just caught it and met the shadow beyond.

The great mass of plain and hill in movement towards the oceans beyond, where the sun was now glaring down, made a vivid picture in my mind. It was a melancholy feeling - dawn, day after day, year after year. Then the light flooded the hill on which I stood and I turned to watch it catch the curves and edges of the topmost hills; there was colour now in the west and the sun had lost its first redness; curling spirals of smoke rose among the trees where the Dogras were lighting fires. I came down warm and happy to find a mug of tea in the tent and Sadheo shivering over it and wringing his hands with cold.

I spent the rest of the day sketching the various orchids that I had found and talking to John Wakeford who was going down to recce a campsite south of Kalemyo. As it seemed likely that we were coming to the end of our time together I reminded him of my wish to be posted to a regimental job.

After seeing the CO off to Kalemyo, Terry, Kurup and I set off to climb a ridge of one of the local hills. Terry was soon a long way ahead and long before we reached the ridge Kurup sank to his knees, lay down, and said that he could not see. He had only fainted so I sat down and sketched until he felt well enough to make his way to the shade of a tree. He had been convinced, he said, that he was going to die.

Sunburn was more noticeable than at Tiddim; my face and lips were soon cracked and sore and my body turned from brown to pink. The height was not much more than at Tiddim and we wondered if frost on the ground was to blame. At evening we gathered round the glowing sigri, Kurup warming his hands, blue flames hovering over the burning pine cones, the tent door open.

On the 18th November we woke early, expecting the General Purpose Transport (GPT) Company. A bank of cloud filled the valley

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

but above it the sky was clear and The Plough and Arcturus showed. I lit a roaring blaze in the mess tent and we washed and shaved in luxury. 1000 hours and still no trucks. At 1430 Bill Gleed and I walked back to the fork where the Falam track left the track down to Kalemmyo and learnt that our 15 trucks were held up at Fort White; we walked there and whiled away the afternoon shivering and smoking until the GPT officer invited us into his tent for a toddy. He was a Scot and talked to us about his Pathans of whom he was very proud.

‘They’re a wee bit like us, ye know; they think they’re aye as ‘guid as any man’.’

We did not leave until 1830 - it was already dark. After a slow and bumpy journey with many twists and turns, always downhill, and after many pauses and waits we reached our destination. Eight miles down the road at Stockade 2, about 1,000 feet above sea-level, we could see lights, and rounding one more corner came suddenly on a big camp fire. The light of the flames flickered on brown faces and bare arms - a group of BORs sitting round a fire; the fire lit the tall straight trunks of teak trees behind them and to our surprise showed up the steel nose and gun muzzle of their tank parked quietly like a docile elephant in the trees behind them.

We came on down through the forest until at Stockade 1 we met troops of the 11th East African Division which had fought its way down the Kabaw valley; there was silence, and blackout, forms sleeping in slit trenches and silent negro guards with sten guns.

A few miles farther on and we came to a crossroads - Kalemmyo, a white wooden signpost with a single finger pointing back the way we had come - ‘Tiddim 48 miles’.

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Kalemmyo was on the edge of the dry belt of the Burmese plain and away from the great teak forests; our immediate surroundings were flat and low, and although we were not much more above sea-level than we had been at Dimapur the climate in December was pleasant compared with the climate of that humid place. We were in open scrub instead of the tangled jungle of Assam and the Chin hills; here and there were clumps of banana trees, and dotted about the camp

were termite hills and some small trees with huge broad rough leaves - 'bastard teak', they were called. The days were hot and the nights cold, cold enough for me to wear a serge battledress top after sundown. In the mornings I woke to hear flights of green parakeets screaming overhead, a sound of the plains, and there were pied and green woodpeckers, fantail flycatchers, grey and white bulbuls, pied mynas and a rufous backed shrike which regularly perched on our single telegraph wire.

A small river, the Zi Chaung, ran down from the hills not far from camp, and the hard earth 'road' that ran by our tents crossed it by a ford where the river was a foot deep and twenty yards wide and the clear water ran over brown pebbles. Upstream of the ford some engineers had built a springboard and one could dive and swim in a pool of cold water about seven feet deep. I often met the AFS ambulance drivers there and visited their Mess which was not far away. The AFS headquarters was run by a genial figure called Ed Spavin from New Bedford, Mass.; he had once sailed in the Newport to Bermuda yacht race and his ambition, which I shared for an evening, was to find a sailing boat in the Far East and sail it home. The AFS wore what clothes came to hand and their discipline was free and easy. Danny James whom I met on the Tiddim road was one day driving his jeep at speed down the Kabaw valley; it was the dry season and he raised a great cloud of brown dust behind him; he was overtaken by an angry divisional commander (General Gracey) who stopped him and asked if he did not know that there was a fifteen mile an hour speed limit to keep down dust clouds because they would betray our positions to the enemy. Danny got out of his jeep and smiling tolerantly said 'Why General, you don't win wars at 15 mph.'

By the roadside away from camp we began to meet Burmese; they were slender and quite different in appearance from the Chins, their faces were finer, and they wore long white or coloured linen skirts called (lungyi).

At their sides hung long knives or 'dah'. They moved with an easy gait at the side of the road and smoked fat white cigars made of rolled maize leaf. Cpl O'Dell said to me, 'If Churchill saw one of those he'd chuck all his cigars away and take to Woodbines.' O'Dell was observant and interested in all he saw. One day he brought me a

flat-headed fish which he had found three feet underground in damp mud when digging a trench for a latrine. The little fish had well-developed pectoral fins and tail and was about 2½ ins long; we supposed that it was waiting for the rainy season.

One afternoon, as I was drowsing in the shade of a tree and only dimly aware of my surroundings, of the dry dusty road near camp, the sound of guns in the distance, the droning of an aeroplane and the pleasant dry heat, two of our office staff joined me. They were highly intelligent havildar-clerks from South India, Muthu Krishna and Devassi, and they said that they would while away the time by telling me stories. No one was about and there was something soporific about the atmosphere, the distant murmur of turtle-doves and Devassi's soft, excited southern accent. Devassi told the tale, Muthu Krishna breaking in at intervals with a bit of detail or to say 'Yes, it was so'. My eyes were closed and they told me a tale of a sort of snake - 'A hooded sarpon' they said 'like a cobra; when young it takes a smooth stone and after breathing on it many thousands of years the stone becomes a "diamond", a red-blue stone which we call "manicum" - and the snake carries it about; and the snake when it went to bathe left the stone on a river bank; and a man came and covered the stone with mud so that the snake when it came again could not see it, and the snake pined away many years by the river bank and all the man's children died, one by one, and at last the man himself died of leprosy.'

Devassi's voice was hypnotic and I was half asleep, when Muthu Krishna took over the role of chief story-teller and told another tale, a wild-sounding romance of surgery - 'Sir, it is about famous doctor; Yen Rangachari of Madras. A British soldier was mad and he had headaches and this doctor, the King's physician, Sir, (Oh yes: he flew to New York and London and other places, very famous man I tell you) he broke some bones of the skull and you see the brain - if you touch it you die. It is transparent, so you could see the spider inside (it had got there, Sir, because the man was a gardener and he had sniffed a flower and the gardener had got the spider up his nose). The doctor he held up a mirror to the spider and it came out.'

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Near us at a place called Htoma Myauk an air strip was hacked out of the jungle; it was of bare earth and when finished was used to bring us supplies and to fly patients out. Before long a Mobile Surgical Unit arrived and soon was joined by a Casualty Clearing Station. There was a big influx of doctors and Nursing Sisters (QAIMNS) They seemed not to belong to our simple way of life. On those nights the moon shone in a clear starry sky, the great trees were motionless and in the elephant grass, dry earth and scattered anthills the silence was broken only by chirping crickets and the distant hum of a lighting plant at the Surgical Unit.

American pilots came to see us near Kalemryo, for Dakotas flew daily between Imphal and Htoma Myauk. These Americans, said one of us, were 'kitted out with everything the modern jungle fighter needs'. They had uniforms with badges, knee-length boots and gaiters, sunglasses, and long-peaked caps; and they were armed to the teeth with automatic pistols and jungle knives. The nearest Japanese were not less than 20 miles away and we found it difficult to take our visitors seriously, particularly when we found how indefatigable they were in their search for 'trophies', Japanese relics, bits of uniform, tin hats, and especially flags, those big white silk flags with the rising sun red in the middle.

On 3rd December, I had a trip to Imphal. The Dakota had no seats and I sat with some convalescent patients on empty baggage sacks in the body of the plane. I had only once flown before. The sudden roar of the engines and the gathering enormous speed seemed to be taking us to inevitable doom: the trees on either side flashed by, faster and faster and only yards away; there were no signs of leaving the ground and I thought we must crash into the jungle at the end of the strip, when suddenly and miraculously we were floating above the tree-tops.

We flew at several thousand feet and to the west, above massed white cumulus, saw the tops of the mountains through which we went to Tiddim. The pilot asked me to sit with him and I could then look down on the length of the Kabaw valley and see the winding road from Tamu to Palel and the battle-scarred hilltops where 20th Indian Division a few months earlier had held the Japanese advance on Imphal.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

From the air Imphal seemed big, my first sight of semi-civilisation for three months; I had a strong desire for shops, cinemas and restaurants, none of which were to be had. I found the Anglo-Burman corporal who was to travel back with me, and the rations of beer and spirits that I was also expected to bring; I started back for the airfield with Cpl Riley and on the way passed a squadron of tanks raising clouds of dust as they lumbered in the opposite direction. They bore the names of Scottish mountains - Ben Lawers, Ben Dearg and so on. The Betty 'B', our Dakota of the morning flight, was waiting for us on the airstrip. We flew low and I saw a lot of detail of the Kabaw valley, including the villages of Tamu and Witok. I had a warm welcome at Kalemyo for I had with me some Scotch - 'White Horse'. I did not know the difference between one brand and another, but we all certainly knew the difference between Scotch and Canadian Club rye, the sort of whisky that usually came with the rations. I also brought news that Kalewa, on the Chindwin 15 miles east of Kalemyo, had been taken that day by the East Africans.

Once or twice in early December we had single, heavy downpours of rain, not long lasting, and on the morning of the 10th I woke to find it foggy and dark and cold. The fog cleared quickly after sunrise. That day the Army Commander came unannounced to inspect us. All I wrote in my diary was,

'Slim came round this morning - he looked like a brusque farmer, perhaps feeling out of place in a hospital.'

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When I had seen a bit of India I began to enjoy reading Kipling's books about it. McKeown, the QM, found me one evening over one of them and after a few drinks rather surprisingly denounced Kipling, saying,

'Of course, he was the worst kind of imperialist you can get.'

He added after a pause,

'The best thing Kipling ever said was a remark of PC Wren's describing a garrison sermon, "Dearly beloved brethren - and you men there."'

I took on a new batman, Ram Raj, when I sacked Sadheo. Ram Raj's morning routine was always the same: I would be at the table reading by the light of a hurricane lamp and would hear him coming; he appeared, shadowy, at the tent door, there was a ringing click of the heels and a not very military salute; I would turn to him, say 'Morning, Ram Raj' and smile. So much notice mildly embarrassed him and he started looking in unlikely places for my mug; when his eye lit on it quite near him, he clutched it with both hands, uttered a 'Huh' of triumph and shambled off to get my tea, crooning to himself. Sometimes his departure was accompanied by nose-clearing noises which I found unpleasant.

Before Xmas I flew to Imphal again, to inquire about a jeep which the Unit had been promised. Don put me up at rear echelon outside Imphal and at Base Supply Depot we found a brand new jeep waiting to be collected. We went to the airstrip to see about my flying back that day to Kalembo as planned but instead of an American pilots' usual cheery greeting - 'Sure, just turn up; we'll wait for you' we found an RAF crew. Since the previous day they had taken over from the USAAF. They looked coldly at us, told us that they gave no lifts, and said that all passages must be booked through XIVth Army HQ. At 'Army', while we waited our turn outside a door marked RAF, another door opened and the Army Commander came down the passage. It was only a week since I had seen Slim at Kalembo but if I had never seen him I could not have mistaken that face and jaw. We stiffened against the wall and he passed with a kindly enough greeting. 'Army' said that I should have to wait some days to fly back so I decided that instead of flying back I would drive the jeep down myself that night.

Until the evening I passed the time in the Imphal bazaar with Smudger, who had come to Imphal with me for the trip. The Manipuris are very handsome by repute and in the bazaar we had a chance to confirm this. The women had attractive mongoloid features, rounded cheeks and glossy black hair - beautiful hair. Their figures were upright with long straight limbs, rounded but not fat. They wore a kind of sari which left the shoulders bare; I saw none with veils. Their skin was light brown; they carried babies on their backs, chubby little brown babies with straggly black hair, slit eyes and tiny very

prominent eyebrows. The atmosphere was like that in every eastern bazaar - no one appeared much interested in business, a customer was rather a nuisance, breaking the thread of talk with cronies or rousing the shopkeeper from a pleasant sleep.

We returned to Don's place at 1700 to pack the jeep - Smudger, a Havildar Chabha, a sepoy servant of Chabha's (it was not unusual for havildars to have sepoy servants) and I. We put in rations, filled up with petrol and fixed up side screens and hood: it would be chilly at night. We left in darkness at 1900 after supper and a tot of rum. As far as Palel the road was level and tarred; grasses, hillocks, a cross-wind and the stars reminded me of driving over moorland at home. After Palel the road began to wind up into the mountains and we passed a long convoy coming the other way. I had not driven a jeep at night and was very unpopular with oncoming traffic because I could not find the dip switch; by the time I had found it near my foot the convoy had passed and we were alone. The road, 'as wide as a single bed', turned and twisted up into mist and cold to a pass, then down to a river, then up again to another pass and down to Tamu where we halted at 0100 for a brew. We lit a mixture of petrol and water in a tin can and boiled water for tea. We continued down the Kabaw valley, fording streams, crossing bridges, losing all sense of direction in mist and dark until at 0400 I decided that I had had enough and we called a halt. By then I was entirely an automaton, my mind far away, but every now and then suddenly being brought back to the present by some problem of the road; in the headlights the great jungle trees bordering the road had in my half-sleep fantastic shapes of man or beast; often they were weird draped old women with raised arms and pointing fingers seeming to crowd in on either side of us. Sometimes I had the illusion that I was driving between rows of buildings, tall bashas, but there were only trees. I thought sometimes that Smudger beside me was leaning forward intent on the road; actually he was lying back fast asleep, a blanket over his head and face. Chabha yawned loudly at intervals in the back and the sepoy was curled up asleep on the floor at his feet.

We occasionally saw spotted, cat-like animals and every now and then a stench reminded me that there were bodies about and that in this apparent solitude of jungle a firearm would be comforting. When we

stopped by a stream at 0400 we had come 30 miles from Tamu. We spread our blankets on the shingle; I slept off and on until 0600 when we got up, made more tea, and ate a cold purata (fried chapatti) before going on. I had had a desolate abandoned feeling lying down there in Burma on the shingle, occasionally opening an eye to see if the jeep was still there. The mist was thick and the gloom and the flatness of the surroundings made the Kabaw valley at night seem very lonely. It was a spooky place. After dawn I just sat and drove, dully, choosing the ruts and holes which seemed least objectionable. At first, as always after such a night, I felt ill, but by the time we reached Corps HQ at Mile 61 I was all right and beginning to notice my surroundings - small white pagodas and crystal clear pebbly rivers.

After Corps HQ, where we filled up with petrol, the dust began and we were all thickly coated with it when we reached Kalembo at 1330. We had covered 170 miles in 18½ hours, including a 3 hour halt, an average of 10 mph. I was dirty, dishevelled, unshaven and burning all over from the sun and the hot dusty air, and needed a bath and change. The CO was so pleased to have a new vehicle on the establishment that he forgot to be surprised that I could drive, and Mac appointed me chauffeur to the Post Corporal. It was a time when there was no real work to do, and 'It was nice' I told him, 'to have a good steady job at last.' I took the CO's old jeep to the river and left it out in the middle of a ford for two IORs to scrub it down while I and Kurup went for a swim. We wandered round the ruins of a village and he showed me young bananas (plantains, he called them), a tamarind tree with its delicate tracery of leaves and a papaya tree which was bearing fruit. On the way back we called at a Field Bakery for fresh rolls.

On the 22nd December Mac and I left by jeep at 0700 to do the Unit's Xmas shopping. We had an enjoyable drive, the screen down, the cool air blowing through our clothes, sunlight and cloud shadow on the Chin hills in the west; and there was the joy of hurtling past other traffic and the extraordinary pleasure which is given the driver by the power of a jeep.

We reached the Supply Depot at 0930 but it was 1445 before we got away, what with queues, clerks and overworked Havildars. Laden with December's rations we crawled back clinking loudly for on top of

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

the rations we had four sacks of beer bottles. We travelled at 5-10 mph, carefully skirting potholes, waiting often for dust to clear after the passage of a truck in the opposite direction. At one spot we stopped to stretch our legs where the Myittha river ran by the roadside; we watched a pied kingfisher flying, hovering, manoeuvring, hovering again and then gliding down at an angle with a few wing beats to hit the water with a loud ringing plop, and come out with a fish in his bill.

Early on Xmas eve we started the Xmas celebrations with a 'sundowner' and by Boxing Day everyone was a bit so-so, especially Mac.

On the 27th December I left to go on leave, Mac coming with me as far as Calcutta.



Chapter 13 Darjeeling

There was a wide choice of places to go on leave. Some liked the bright lights of the clubs and hotels of Calcutta; others chose to spend their leave at one of several hill stations where the climate was good and limited social amenities could be found: Ootacamund or 'Ooti' in the Nilgiri hills, Kashmir where one could live on a houseboat, and Nainital or Darjeeling from which one could look at the biggest mountains in the world. Because distances were great and the means of travel crowded and slow it might easily take several days to reach one of the distant leave stations; a sensible system was therefore in use by which, if you had two weeks' leave, the two weeks began after you reached your chosen station and ended when you left it. But for this custom it would have been possible for a man starting on leave from Kalemyo and going to Kashmir, for example, to reach Kashmir on the last day of his leave. No doubt there were some who abused the custom and stretched the time spent in travel beyond what was strictly necessary, but who would grudge it them?

My idea was to go to a hill station near the big mountains and see how close I could get to the mountains themselves. I chose Darjeeling partly because it was nearest to Calcutta and partly because the name had magic associations; it had been the starting point of the early expeditions to Everest and Kangchenjunga and as far as I knew it was the only place outside Nepal where the Sherpa people, of whom I had read a good deal, were to be found.

It was next to impossible in Burma in wartime to find at a few days' notice someone to share my idea of leave, so I decided to go alone, carrying my gear, sleeping under a 'bivvy' tent; in my ignorance I hoped I might get far enough in two weeks to achieve

some minor peak. Mac was also going on leave and we travelled together as far as Calcutta. The flight from Imphal to Sylhet was over the Lushai hills, thrown into fascinating complicated relief by late afternoon sunshine. At Sylhet there were trucks to take us to a transit camp; the tyres at speed on the tarmac made a high-pitched hum that sounded strange after the roads we had travelled. Where a truck was parked on the roadside the hill women, laden with top-heavy baskets, turned to glance sideways and behind, and if the road was clear trotted hurriedly past as though they had no right to be there. Telegraph poles lined the road and we came to 'shops', lighted, open-fronted booths on both sides of the one street.

In Calcutta Mac and I had a room at The Grand Hotel; Mac browsed in bookshops while I went to book myself a berth the next night on the 'Darjeeling Mail'. By chance we met Bill Schwab in the lounge of 'The Grand'; he was supposed to be having treatment in hospital for a bad go of malaria but although far from well he had let himself out and said that he would come to Darjeeling. We arranged to meet there in a few days' time.

Siliguri, where the mountains began, was the end of the main line and the Darjeeling Mail went no farther. I crossed the station platform to what at first looked like a toy train - the mountain railway to Darjeeling. The squat little steam engines were driven by hillmen with pillbox caps and Gurkha faces; they had two helpers, cheerful-looking urchins who sat over the front wheels of the engine, one each side; their job was to throw handfuls of sand on the line whenever the rails were slippery on the climb of nearly 8,000 feet to Darjeeling. I shared a carriage with two others going on leave, an RAF Flight-Lieutenant who knew Kalemyo and a Lieutenant from the Ordnance Corps who had worked in Spain as a reporter for some newspaper during the Civil War. I never liked journalists and this one irritated me by filling his talk with borrowed images: 'The shadows of the trees' he told us 'are like the shadows of cathedral pillars down the aisle.' At first the train climbed through tropical jungle by a series of S-bends. When the slope became too steep we zig-zagged, stopping at the end of each zig and zag to change direction, the engine pulling when we went one way and pushing when we went the other. Finally, when it seemed we could climb no more steeply, the track went round

and round like a corkscrew, under and over itself; we reached Ghum in a clammy mist that had begun to envelop us at 6,000 feet. Darjeeling was not much farther, slightly downhill, and we arrived at 1430.

The town was on the crest and western slope of a narrow ridge; only the small bazaar some way below the ridge was on flat ground. At the station a pale girl with slanting brown eyes and pleasant features lifted my heavy kitbag on her back with an easy movement, at the same time arranging a carrying strap across her forehead. I hesitated to let her add my rucksack to her load but she made nothing of it and we set off to walk up The Mall, the main street, to the Windamere Hotel. Before long I was breathing heavily and turned to see if she was falling back: not a bit of it. She was at my heels and showed no signs of breathing, heavily or otherwise. Clearly I had misjudged the situation. She was the first Sherpa, or rather Sherpani, that I ever met. We passed a café in a square called the Chowrasta and I heard the voices of BORs.

‘Ham an’ eggs an’ chips twice, please Miss’ and ‘What’s at the flicks tonight?’

The Windamere was high on a sharp ridge, and more like a boarding house than a hotel. The guests seemed much the same in Darjeeling as they would have been in a wartime English country hotel - Wantage, say, or Woodstock, or for all I knew even Windermere itself. There were old ladies, hook nosed and grey haired, some plump, some thin, dressed in lace and black fur; there were a few middle-aged and young women, rather flabby, busy feeders; and there was a sprinkling of hearty young soldiers on leave from the 5th Indian Division. There was also a pleasant-looking older man with a toothbrush moustache; he looked like a soldier not in uniform, and his wife was with him. When I looked from my bedroom window that first night the moon shone on a dense mist which filled the deep valley below and there were clouds in the sky to the north east.

Next day I artlessly set about arranging my 10 or 12 days’ trek. Hampered as I was by ignorance and by not having been through any ‘usual channels’ or made any ‘contacts’, I soon began to wonder how many British people had had the experience of trying to arrange a holiday that was not quite in accordance with the usual rules and

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

customs. I went first to the Deputy Commissioner's office and tackled the Indian clerk at the reception desk. He was from Bihar and his name was Gopal Prusung.

'Have you any maps of the area?' I asked.

He gave a sideways twitch of the head,

'O yes Sir, we have 500 maps.'

'All right. I should like to have a look and buy one or two.'

'Sir, they are not for sale.'

He told me there was no place where you could buy maps and when I explained that I was intending to go for a trek, and would be camping where I felt inclined he added that there was no place where you were allowed to camp.

'There are many wild animals about, Sir. They will eat you up.'

He went on to say that the rules were that any trek must be officially approved and places booked at dak bungalows. In the end I persuaded Gopal Prusung to book me in for a night at a bungalow near Tiger Hill above Ghum and also at a number of bungalows along the Singalila ridge to Phalut, a well-known viewpoint at about 12,000 feet. It seemed all I could do under the circumstances.

I spent the next two days by myself walking down the 3,000 feet to Badamtam one day and coming back the next. Badamtam had about it a deep calm; I had a bungalow to myself where a friendly old chowkidar anticipated my efforts to light a fire by doing it for me. The small garden was lent a dash of colour by the bright red leaves of poinsettia, a magnolia was just coming into flower and there were sweet-smelling roses, red and white, and ferns and many small flowers whose names I did not know. The Rungneet, a tributary of the Teesta, roared in the glen below, and all about the bungalow I could hear the subdued voices of children. I cooked a simple meal and looked at Blackwood's Magazine, of which there were old copies in the bungalow; after dark I went outside to enjoy the moonlight and listen to the chirping of crickets. The night was warm down there and I was tired, and content to be alone. I found it strange to be there at last, seven miles north of Darjeeling, a place made romantic because it had

been the jumping off place of so many past expeditions to great mountains. I was long going to sleep; a full moon shone in at the window. As I climbed back to Darjeeling next day I was overtaken by a spindly-legged figure dressed in white; he held an umbrella as, I was sure, a badge of status. I was breathless and his insistence on entering into a long and one-sided conversation in English was irritating.

‘Where are you going? What is your business? Why are you carrying your luggage?’ My answer to the last question, ‘Because I enjoy it’ must have sounded hollow when anyone could see that I was not enjoying it at all, and his next question had about it a remorseless logic,

‘In that case, why are you going so slowly?’

I decided that night to swallow my pride and find a porter for my next excursion. I went to see a Captain Kydd who could, I was told, engage porters for me. He was a plump man, a civilian, and wanted I think to be helpful; I could never find out much about him but I suspected later that he might have been of mixed blood. We fell out as soon as he exclaimed that I should on no account have been given dak bungalow passes without evidence that I had first booked Sherpa porters and a cook - ‘and’ I retorted crossly ‘I suppose a sweeper and water carrier as well!’

I told him at length that I liked at least to clean my own teeth, and he countered by informing me that the local Area Commander, a General, had issued orders about not lowering British prestige by having too few servants. To my irritation he addressed me all the time as ‘Sahib’. In the end he said that he would get me two porters, what he called ‘the decent minimum’, and I promised to come back later and let him know what I decided.

‘The coolies’ he confided as I left, ‘know me as “The Burra Sahib”- ‘You may laugh, my boy, but it means something when they call me that.’

Next morning I rang the Station Staff Officer and had no difficulty in obtaining authorisation for the trek to Phalut. I then borrowed a map of Darjeeling from another officer in the hotel and made a copy

of it. He had bought it without trouble in Calcutta from the Survey of India, as I should have done if I had known better.

In the Darjeeling bazaar I encountered groups of Tibetans; their long hair was in pigtailed and they wore earrings, embroidered hats with fur-trimmed flaps, and long cloth boots bound below the knee with colourful woven garters; they were wild and dirty-looking men who had come over the passes from Tibet for trade. As I walked up from the bazaar to the hotel the dank grey cloud which had covered Darjeeling since I got there parted; I turned to look north and saw Kangchenjunga before me, its whiteness against a pale blue sky making the white of the clouds below appear a dirty grey. My feelings were deeper than I could have imagined without experiencing them; I put my hands on an iron railing and looked down at the bright coloured bazaar below but my eyes went back again and again to the gigantic mountain vision. From the edge of the hill by Windamere Hotel I sat down to gaze once more; after about ten minutes the clouds closed the gap before me and that day I did not again see the vision. I had a feeling that I remembered from a first visit to the Alps, of being on the edge of going into new mountains: I was at the edge of what I wanted to do and yet it seemed utterly unattainable because of my lack of familiarity with local conditions and my dislike of some of the accepted ways of doing things there. All right, I thought, I will behave like a Sahib until I have found out all I need to know.

I went back to Kydd and said that I would take one porter. He turned to others in the room and said,

‘The Doctor Sahib is taking only one coolie because he is carrying out an experiment.’ He whispered in an aside to me,

‘It will save prestige to put it like that.’

At last he produced a sturdy, smiling young Sherpa called Lobsang, for which I shall always be grateful to him. The arrangement was that any payment would be made by me to Kydd himself and Lobsang would receive from the ‘Burra Sahib’ whatever was due to him. I never knew what commission, if any, the ‘Burra Saib’ kept for himself but I do not think Lobsang suffered, for by the end of ten days together we had become good friends and I saw to it that he did not lose.

It was the last day of December 1944.

I called at the Military Hospital by the Lebong racecourse and found a Warrant Officer there, RSM Ryde, who had come out on the *Ranchi* and shared the frustrations of our stay in Egypt with the rest of us.

We spent the afternoon in reminiscence over tea and Christmas cake and from the QM stores he gave me flour and sugar for my trip; they were rationed in Darjeeling and I could not buy them in the bazaar. Ryde gestured towards my sack on the ground and said 'You can leave anything around - it'll be there for months - no one will touch it.'

Bill Schwab had signed himself out of the hospital in Calcutta and now appeared at Darjeeling; his attack of malaria had passed off but he was down with asthma. I had what was called 'hill diarrhoea', a commonplace ailment due to infection but blamed by everyone on grit in the drinking water; it probably accounted for much of my bad temper in Darjeeling. We made a sorry pair and decided, rather than be more ambitious, to go to the bungalow a few miles away at Senchal, near Tiger Hill; Lobsang could come with us.

From Tiger Hill, we were told, we might in the early morning get a glimpse of Mount Everest.

Outside the Senchal bungalow it was cold and there was mist and a fine wetting rain; inside we sat round a crackling flaring wood fire while the wind howled and made weird noises in the chimney. When I looked out before going to bed the mist was dense and the wind bitter from the south west.

Lobsang curled under a blanket in front of the fire while Bill and I rolled up on two string cots that we had dragged into the living room. We had both been short of companions and we talked for hours - undergraduate talk which comprehensively embraced the nature of reality, the universe, mankind and morals. Was Kangchenjunga there, for example, to the north of us, in darkness and mist, now that we could not see it? What lay beyond outer space? We pompously decided that we were specimens in the history of biology, belonging to a species that could think and be introspective; we decided we were on

a globe in a universe whose final nature was unknown and that we lived a life which as far as we could see had no purpose, and might be happy, or sad, or painful. It seemed sensible to conclude that we might as well try to make it happy for ourselves and for as many others as possible. We disposed of character, perception and action by deciding that we wanted to be men of a certain kind, to have certain experiences and do work of a certain kind. The conversation was about as informed as other similar conversations, and about as useful. It meandered on to the sound of the wind, the rattling of the shutters and the flicker and noise of the flames, and my last memory of it was of a drowsy voice from Arizona murmuring,

‘Then there’s Gawd - whur’s He come from? - whur’s he goin?’

When I rose the sky was clear and starry, and the wind cold enough to numb my fingers. Clouds were low on the horizon and the ground was frozen crisp; not far below were the lights of a village - Senchal. I turned into the hut and watched Lobsang blow up the embers of our fire of the night before. At sunrise we had a complete view of Kangchenjunga; through glasses it looked hard and sheer - a mass of steep ice and knife-edged buttresses. To the north east of us was a single lovely snow peak sticking out above cloud, and from the top of Tiger Hill we saw peaks which we had been told included Everest and were called ‘The Three Sisters’; they bore about 312 degrees.

Bill and I parted at Ghum: the height and dampness of Darjeeling had not suited him and to my regret he decided that he could not face the ten day trek to Phalut and back along a ridge which was often between 10 and 12,000 feet high. After a night or two in the shadier haunts of Darjeeling he went back to Calcutta and I heard later that he came to grief in some back street there and ended up in hospital with a broken head. I never saw him again.

The Singalila Ridge, high and winding, ran west from Ghum, then north-west and finally north, over the high points of Tangu, 10,000 feet, and Sandakphu, 12,000 feet, to Phalut, only slightly lower. North and east of the ridge was Sikkim, accessible to foreigners only by permission of the Government of India. To the west lay the closed and secret kingdom of Nepal, home of the Gurkhas, a land of great

mountains in which lay the whole of the west side of Kangchenjunga and the south side of the main Himalayan range, which included Makalu, Everest, Lhotse and many other peaks. At that time Nepal was almost totally closed to foreign travellers whose eyes, from the Singalila ridge, could only gaze across the tangle of hills with yearning.

Lobsang bought rice at Sukhiapokhri bazaar and we carried on to Jorepokhri bungalow at 7,500 feet. Lobsang was a cheerful and colourful figure; he wore a grey Balaclava helmet with the peak pointing any old way; three shirts, a blue, a light red and a grey; a light grey jacket; bright blue pants; two pairs of stockings and large black boots. The boots were so big that he soon began to suffer from blisters which turned into ulcers; from that moment he carried the boots slung round his neck and walked barefoot whether there was snow on the ground or not. He walked at a steady three miles an hour with a rapid step, whistling as he went; sometimes he imitated bird calls and whenever he reached the crest of a rise he whistled shrilly through his teeth like a marmot. Jorepokhri bungalow was on a hillock covered with mossy lawns. There was a small lake and the plot was surrounded by fir trees. Lobsang lit a fire and we drank tea. I went outside and as I walked quietly by the lake I came on a deer; it stood about four feet high at the shoulder and showed its white tail as it bounded away through the trees.

I thought I should miss playing chess and talking with Bill but I found that Lobsang's friendly though silent company was all I wanted. Moreover, it was a chance to get to know one Sherpa and prepare for future trips with others. 10 years later there was a jeepable military road to Sandakphu, but in 1945 and even in 1952, when I again walked that way, there was no more than a bridle path. As we climbed the 3,500 feet from Mani Banjyang to our next night's stop at Tanglu (which Lobsang called Tumling) he began occasionally to converse, going uphill with only slightly slackened speed, and maintaining his quick step. He always had enough breath to talk and presently pointed out a tumbledown ruin of a bungalow, remarking with a grin, 'Achcha wala bangala, Sahib' – 'Fine bungalow, Sir', and betraying a sense of irony which quickly became the basis of our relationship. 500 feet short of Tanglu, when I was longing to sit down, he stopped and

produced a bottle of the local beer - 'chang'- which we shared; it was a clear yellowish liquid tasting vaguely of wine, rather sour and yeasty. He made certain that I had more than half the bottle and either the last 500 feet was very steep or else the chang was hard on the wind, for long before we reached Tanglu I was going very slowly and feeling muzzy about the head. Our path was along a bare grassy ridge; the grass was short and yellow and below us on either side were rocky outcrops and stunted, moss-covered trees - dwarf oak, and holly. Farther down was jungle and the depths of a great valley. In one place we passed huts where there were dirty, ragged children and many chickens. The path was either stony or muddy and Lobsang stoutly ploughed his way up in bare feet through mud or snow. I liked his straightforwardness:

'How old are you, Lobsang?'

'Me?'

'Yes.'

'20 years,' pause, 'What about you?'

'26.'

After a rest I went to the top of a rise 200 feet above the Police post at Tanglu. There was a dusting of snow everywhere. The west side of the sharp peak fell quickly to dense jungle and I heard the murmur of a distant river; beyond a succession of sunlit valleys I could see terraces and clusters of houses.

I sat sheltering from the wind behind a small stone tower on which white flags fluttered from bamboos: Lobsang called it a daza. Here at over 10,000 feet were only barren stones, moss and stunted vegetation. On the hills to the north was a patchy covering of snow, streaks of cloud lay in the valleys and parts of the steep hillsides far below were terraced. They recalled the Chin hills except that those were rarely high enough to lose the jungle altogether. 3000 feet below and only 10 miles away in a direct line the windows of Darjeeling reflected the setting sun and later, after dark, I could see the lights of street lamps. After I had cooked some of what Captain Kydd ('for prestige, you understand') had called 'the Doctor Sahib's special experimental food'

- and what was it but wheat flour, curry, rice and dal? - the local police visited me.

‘Where have you come from, Sahib? Where are you going? What is purpose of journey?’ He was a nice sergeant, but what a fuss!

‘You will not be entering Nepal, Sahib?’

‘I would not dream of it.’

The rice, bought at Sukhiapokhri and carried wrapped in an old handkerchief, was the best I had ever eaten, and so was the rest of the meal. Lobsang carried a large kukri in his belt and used it indifferently to spread butter, to chop firewood and to pare his toenails; the ordinary kukri has as one of its attachments a small blunt blade about whose use I was curious - it was shaped like the main blade - he explained that it was for striking a light.

Alone by the fire I fell to wondering what I wanted in life. I admired the strong and gentle, those who were masters of themselves; I wanted to be like that. I wanted to know more of mankind, how he lives, how he thinks; I wanted experience of the mountains and the sea, of my own power, and of life in different places, city and wilderness. As to work, I did not know.

On 5th January 1945 sunrise came very rapidly and lit everything in the west with a bright clear light which made rocks and trees and grassy hillocks stand out with startling clarity against a grey-blue background.

My feet had grown cold in the night and as we left Tanglu a little snow was falling, greeted by Lobsang with cries of affected dismay belied by a cheerful grin,

‘Oho, oho, Hium!’

We walked over open scrubland patchily covered with snow through which showed clumps of red moss. Soon we lost the way, went too far down on the Nepal side, and had to climb strenuously back to regain the ridge. Snow began to fall more thickly and a chill wind sprang up which lasted for the rest of the day. On the ridge were lengths of wall, the stones carved with figures of Buddha and writing

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

in Tibetan script - O mane pemi hun, shi. We passed to the left and I asked Lobsang his religion.

‘Lama,’ he said, which I took to mean Buddhist.

We now lost height and went down and down to a narrow saddle where there were huts. Lobsang found more chang and stood me a drink; profiting by experience I drank only half a mugful - we still had a long way to go.

The cold was now bitter; we climbed steeply and steadily for four miles to Kalipokhri at 10,000 feet. Kalipokhri means ‘black lake’ and near some wattle huts I could see a dark stagnant pond. The climb of 2,000 feet in four more miles to Sandakphu was simple misery in wind and blizzard. I was carrying only some 20 lbs. and Lobsang had three times as much. I arrived about 15 minutes behind him, icy cold, sheeted with snow and trembling all over.

He had been very tolerant on the way and whenever I shamelessly tried to sit down to rest had said,

‘Slowly, slowly keep going, Sahib. Here you will get cold, very cold.’

At Sandakphu there were several buildings and Lobsang and I entered the first we found, a tin-roofed shack with two rooms; in the blizzard conditions I failed to see either the main bungalow or a building occupied by the caretaker or chowkidar. Lobsang soon had a roaring blaze going and over tea and chapattis and a small bottle of chang we settled down to a pleasant late afternoon. Outside the hut the blizzard continued to blow and when Lobsang brought in a pail of water there was ice on it.

I liked his rough humour. When he slipped on the snow he cried out ‘Very good snow’, and if I then said ‘Well done,’ he roared with laughter. He told me that his home was in Nepal and that he meant to go back there the next year after earning more money. If I had an opportunity next year to visit Sikkim he would be glad to come.

The snow continued to fall and it began to look as if we might have to stay some days at Sandakphu; Lobsang did not think we could

go much farther unless conditions improved and I felt that with no visibility one place was as good as another

I do not think I ever spent a more wretched night or longed so heartily for the dawn. First we got in two mattresses from the bedroom and put them down before the fire. I gave Lobsang a spare sweater and my groundsheet to add to his one blanket but even so he must have been terribly cold. I had two blankets and spent my time trying to ease aching limbs and at the same time lose as little heat as possible. About four in the morning Lobsang blew up the fire and we sat round it for half an hour while I made tea, then we tried again to sleep; this time I put my feet in my rucksack and was warmer. I found too that the mere act of turning over, and the puffing and blowing that followed, warmed me up enough to make me comfortable for a quarter of an hour. All night I had a sore nose, the prelude to a bad cold. In the morning I looked at the mess: dirty dishes, frozen water, snow on the table and over some of the chairs, snow piled 18 ins high inside the door, a gusty gale outside rattling the shutters and piling up more snow. I shaved painfully. I was extremely breathless.

After a look outside and a talk with Lobsang I went to see who was in the main bungalow. I found three army officers and half a dozen Sherpas. They were going no farther and were about to start back to Tanglu. Lobsang and I decided to follow their tracks and 400 feet down overtook them. They were ploughing slowly through two feet of new snow in the blizzard. The going was very heavy for the leader and the four of us who had no loads took it in turn to break a trail.

To reach Kalipokhri took four hours. We entered one of the huts and shared out some food before going on. My contribution of cold chapattis seemed as welcome to my new friends as their tinned butter and jam to spread on the chapattis were to me. We struggled on down to the saddle where Lobsang and I had had chang the day before. We entered one of the huts there too and the Sherpas made tea for everyone. Since leaving Sandakphu we had been on the go for six hours.

Before going on the Sherpas tore from the roof of the hut some long bamboo poles with which to test the depth of the snow on the

track: the occupants were quite indifferent to this pilfering. All day I had had an unpleasant cold but I now began to feel better. The surface of the snow was sometimes firmer than it had been and I thought that I myself was beginning to recover. All the same to plough ahead spurred by conscience to take a turn at making the track for a 50 yard stretch was heart-bursting. At 1750 the blizzard was blowing hard as ever; we were in deep soft snow on the crest of the ridge and light was beginning to fail. Everywhere was silence except for our grunts and groans and the noise of the wind. We had a short rest and then tried again but after 100 yards we all came to a stop and held a sort of consultation. We turned back to a cluster of wattle huts that we had just passed and stumbled into the first one we reached; inside, except for a faint light from the glowing embers of a smoky fire, all was dark; the roof dripped melting snow and round the fire a family squatted, huddled together, looking up at us. We stood, breathing fiercely as cold and tired people do, stamping the snow from our boots and brushing it off our clothing.

Many years later I became used to the way in which Sherpas will enter the house of a stranger and take it over. They did so now. They carried embers from the fire to another part of the floor, breathed on them with those bellows Sherpas have for lungs, and soon we were sitting on low circular cane stools holding out our hands to a blaze and trying not to put our feet in the puddles on the floor. Slowly we undressed, drank tea out of china and copper bowls and warmed up; it was a strange scene - dim, blanketed figures, much coughing and spluttering, drips from the roof.

Lobsang merged in with the other Sherpas, whose sirdar Ang Purba later fed us on army Meat and Vegetable stew followed by coffee. We ate in semi-darkness and retired into a wet corner of the room, Gordon Grant and I rolled up in blankets, John Oventon and John Palmer beside us in some sort of sleeping-bag. The Sherpas carried on with their chatter (they will talk all night) and devoured huge bowls of rice while we looked on. Warm and fed, we were comfortable in spite of the stinging smoke and drips of water.

I slept on and off until a cock in the shack began to crow and I could dimly see the fowls, dogs, cats and children that shared our lodging.

Gradually we came to and found on going outside a glorious sunny dawn which I hardly appreciated as my cold was worse again and affected my chest. There was not a cloud in the sky and Kangchenjunga was clear before us; we tried in vain to accustom our eyes to the glare of the bright sun on new snow. After a large breakfast we assembled outside the hut and were required to take photographs of everyone who had been there, especially of one I took to be the lady of the house and who now appeared for the first time and politely proposed some recognition of her hospitality. She wore Sherpa style clothes, a dark blouse and a heavy striped woollen apron held in place by a pink cloth about the waist; she had knee-length woollen boots with leather soles and a long, thick, heavy necklace of alternating coral and a variegated stone that the Sherpas call 'Zi'; she had two long pigtails and her earrings were gold- coloured metal discs four or five inches in diameter. Over everything she wore a purplish woollen coat or cloak which reached from the top of her head to her ankles. Like many Sherpa ladies she had the look of a woman on no account to be trifled with.

For four hours we plodded wearily in hot sunshine through deep soft snow and reached Tanglu exhausted. The sun on the new snow had been hot on our faces all the way, burning the eyeballs in spite of our efforts to shield them with pieces of cloth.

On the way from Sandakphu we had simply taken each other as comrades, sharing discomforts, food, drink, trail-breaking and the making of decisions; during the afternoon at Tanglu, as we rested, ate, and dried our sodden clothing we found out about each other, and I discovered that my three chance companions were as friendly, interesting and good-natured as I could have wished. They were a captain, a lieutenant and a corporal, gunners from 5th Indian Division. Unfortunately they had to go on to Darjeeling because their leave was at an end, but I decided to stay another day at Tanglu with Lobsang in hopes of being able to make sketches of Kangchenjunga.

Outside the bungalow the light was brilliant, the snow at our level was a smooth, fresh white and Kangchenjunga in this light looked whiter than ever. When I looked at it, pencil in hand to make a sketch, it was so bright that when I looked back to the paper I could for about 15 seconds see nothing of the sketch I was trying to draw.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

In the valley was dense white cloud; Darjeeling in the distance was covered with snow. The arc of the northern horizon was a jagged line of rock, snow and ice. The sky beyond was a clear pale blue; far in north Sikkim the heads of one or two solitary peaks showed above the rest. Each peak alone would have been striking were it not that Kangchenjunga, knocking one off balance by its height, mass and nearness made others look by comparison insignificant.

There was no wind and the sun was warm. Close at hand I heard the tinkle of a pony's bell, the drip of melting snow and the sound of icicles falling from the eaves. Lobsang potted about all day barefoot in the snow, sometimes sitting beside me on the warm doorstep, watching me write and wondering, I supposed, what it was all about. We shared out the rice that was left and he began to cook his half while tuning and playing a four stringed instrument like a primitive guitar. I handed him my binoculars and he at once turned them to look from the big end to the small, clicking his tongue against his teeth, 'tck, tck' with pleasure and repeating 'How small! How small!' Sherpas have distant vision which is so good as to be past belief and back to front was the only way I ever saw them use binoculars - a favourite pastime was to look at one's feet through the wrong end and try to walk like that over rough ground.

In the evening I sat on one side of the wood fire, Lobsang squatting on the other - clean, attractive little beggar. I gave him a dish of stewed prunes and afterwards he carefully pushed the stones through a hole between the floorboards and then neatly put a matchstick across the hole as though to complete the act; he would hold up a light for me to read, tend the fire or look quietly at a map of India. I had grown fond of him.

Two days' leisurely walking brought us back to Darjeeling. On the way we passed a litter of dead puppies, frozen; their mother was by them, limping as though her feet were frostbitten; 'Tck, Tck' from Lobsang. When we came to an awkward frozen bit of path he exclaimed 'Oho, ho, ho' and when I slipped and went to the bottom on my behind, burst into outright laughter. At Jorepokhri the lawns and trees were covered in new snow and the lake was hard frozen. We had bought rice on the way and I wondered how on earth Lobsang could eat so much: he told me that a pound of uncooked rice and two pounds

of wheat flour were a proper day's ration; I could eat no more for a meal than the equivalent of a handful of uncooked rice.

He described how kukris were fashioned in the furnace and on the anvil in the villages. He claimed that in Nepal there were no 'chiddar', the wattle huts in which we spent a night, and if by 'Nepal' he meant, as was customary with Nepalese, the capital Kathmandu, then he was right, but I came to know later that there were plenty of such huts up and down the country. Nothing had prepared me for the sort of life I saw led by the family in that hut: we could not make out where they slept nor how in spite of the drips and mud and smoke and damp they turned out for their photographs in the morning - apparently dry and fairly clean.

I found Gordon Grant at the Windamere and we spent a pleasant evening looking at maps and planning our next expedition. He told me that Kydd had asked if they had seen anything of me, muttering to himself,

'I never should have let him go with one coolie - very bad, very bad.'

I thought about my leave; measured in one way I had achieved nothing, but I had seen mountains of a size and splendour that no amount of reading, no photographs could have made real to me. I had found a closeness that makes relationships with Sherpas easy; I had found that I could live in this country on what I could find in villages by the way; and I had learnt something that I could not describe but which I knew would make future expeditions easier.

Lobsang came to see me off and brought his young wife; she was a pretty girl; she had a wide brilliant smile, her cheeks were like red apples and were framed by a fur-trimmed hat. She held a small brown puppy in the crook of her arm. Lobsang went with a party to the Zemu glacier within a twelvemonth and all were lost in a heavy snowstorm.

When I left Darjeeling the mist was thick. Snow lay on the ground and small boys ran alongside the train offering Nepalese coins for sale and throwing in snowballs at anyone silly enough to open a window.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

I had no reason to return by Calcutta and decided to make my way back to Burma by changing at Parvatipur to the metre gauge Bengal & Assam Rly. It would take me to the Brahmaputra at Amingaon where I could cross by steamer to Gauhati. From Gauhati a train to Dimapur and a hitch with a lorry driver to Imphal and down the Kabaw valley would get me to Kalembo, I thought, in three days. It was not to be: it had been easy in December to leave Burma in a half-empty aeroplane but in January the road route to Imphal and on to Kalewa was crammed with traffic; unattached travellers like me were diverted at Gauhati to go by rail to Comilla and be flown to Burma from there. There were many of us and we angrily endured days of delay in transit camps while we fought to get on trains and aeroplanes going our way.

The station platform at Parvatipur, in the middle of nowhere, was covered with bodies sheeted from head to foot like corpses in a mortuary, waiting for trains that would come tomorrow or the day after or the day after that. My midnight train came at 0500 and we rumbled along all day between long and frequent halts. After 12 hours the train was five more hours late. During the night that followed I counted nine stations where we waited for trains to pass the other way and by dawn on the 13th January we were still five stations from Amingaon. The night had been cold - the coldest in Bengal for ten years, I was told - and at dawn a dense mist lay close to the ground, covering the low-lying land.

I waited two days at Gauhati for a train, trying with my pencil to catch the feel of the huge river, the enormous volume of brown water flowing by - hour after hour, month after month. A group of Anglo-Burmese policemen were there waiting to return to Burma. They told me how they walked out through the Hukaung Valley in the monsoon of 1942, how men and women died on the way, how rafts loaded with refugees too weak to move broke up in the rivers; no one could ever count the thousands of dead but the policemen thought they numbered four in every ten. They remembered cold, starvation, exhaustion and disease of every kind, and it puzzled me that what they seemed to have minded most was that they finished the appalling journey barefoot, as if the ultimate indignity for this uniformed force had been to be without boots.

I met at Gauhati a small, sturdy gunner lieutenant with a bristling sandy moustache. Tom Pyke was an intelligent man who had left school early and was educating himself. I had come to the end of my small stock of books and we made some exchanges: he lent me Palgrave's Golden Treasury. Also in the Mess were four infantry subalterns who seemed barely to have left Public School; fresh-faced, rowdy and lacking any interest in their surroundings, they made a sad contrast with Tom Pyke who was interested in everything - birds, people, the country around him, books.

A 'special' was due to leave for Comilla at noon on the 15th January; the journey would take three days. I was told that the train was packed - 'Not a seat anywhere', so I went to see the train MO. He shared a compartment with the OC Train and squeezed us in with the excuse that 'another doctor would be useful.' After Lunding the track wound pleasantly between the Naga and Kasi hills at 1,500-2,000 feet. Tom and the doctor and I played chess now and then but for most of the time I sat as was my habit on the step of the open carriage door admiring the hills and valleys through which we passed. The jungle was open and there were views down between my feet to beautiful clear rocky streams. The prospect was shady, sunny and cool; in the tree-tops I could see troupes of long-tailed monkeys travelling in single file, swinging from branch to branch and from tree to tree; as always, birds were plentiful and I saw from above what from its white tail edged with black I took to be a fishing eagle. On the morning of the third day we were still 60 miles from Comilla but by evening we had arrived, at '20 Rest Camp'. It was an unhappy camp, 'All bullshit' said a Newfoundlander with whom I shared a tent, 'and no bloody good at the things that matter: food, and getting us on our way.'

They charged us one and a half rupees a day for messing, and since I had already spent all my money I told the Camp Adjutant that I wanted a flight into Burma as soon as possible and would have to pay any bills by cheque.

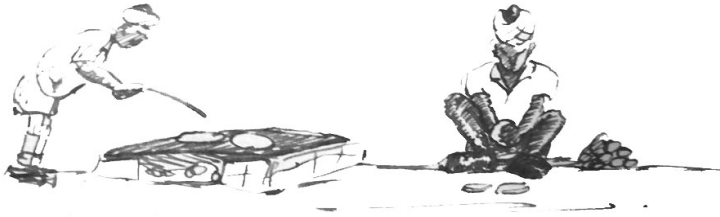
'We don't take cheques from officers.'

'In that case I'll not be able to pay.'

'In that case you'll just have to stay here.'

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

The situation was becoming ludicrous; I tried not to get cross. I told him that British MOs, in case he did not know it, were in short supply where I was going and that if he held me up without good cause I should make it my business to see that General Slim in person knew why. Three days later I was on my way and there was no more nonsense about not taking cheques.



Chapter 14 Central Burma

By the end of December 1944, XIVth Army had pushed the Japanese out of the mountains and across the Chindwin. East of the Chindwin was a range of low hills, the Zibyu Taungdan, and beyond them a plain that stretched to the Irrawaddy; the small towns of Ye-U, Schwebo and Monywa were in that plain in a loop of the Irrawaddy. [See map]. Slim ('Defeat into Victory') had expected the Japanese to make a stand in the Schwebo plain with the Irrawaddy and Mandalay behind them; he had made plans accordingly, expecting a decisive battle in which 33 Corps and 4 Corps would play the chief parts.

However, after crossing the Chindwin in December the Allied advance towards the Irrawaddy was faster than expected and in January, when I reached Comilla on my way back from leave, Ye-U and Schwebo were already in Allied hands. There had been strong rearguard actions and every town and village had had to be fought for, but it had become clear that the enemy was going to make his main stand east of the Irrawaddy and not with his back to that river.

During December, therefore, Slim made far-reaching alterations to his plans. He decided to attack across the Irrawaddy and towards Mandalay from the north and west as before, but at the same time he would also make a secret thrust south along the Gangaw valley to reach Nyaung-U; there he would again cross the Irrawaddy and take Meiktila. Japanese communications with the south would be cut, and their forces in Central Burma would be isolated.

To put the new plan into effect Slim had to alter the dispositions of his troops. He wanted 4 Corps for the secret push to Meiktila, but wished the Japs to believe that they were still opposed at Mandalay by the combined force of 4 Corps and 33 Corps. He therefore left a

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

division of 4 Corps in the north, attaching it for operational purposes to 33 Corps. The rest of 4 Corps made its way to the Gangaw valley.

When after my leave I rejoined 33 Corps (to which 7 IMFTU belonged) most of these regroupings had been carried out and HQ 33 Corps was at Ye-U. 7 IMFTU was still unemployed at Kalemyo but was due any day to move to Sadaung village, south-east of Schwebo. At Schwebo a Casualty Clearing Station was installed.

Some of the details of the changes in 4 Corps and 33 Corps brought about by Slim's regroupings were as follows:-

Before the change of plans the main body of troops in the Irrawaddy loop had been 19th Indian Division in the north, 2nd British Division in the centre (opposite Mandalay) and 20th Indian Division at Monywa. Behind them, coming from Imphal, were 7th, 17th and 5th Indian Divisions.

19th and 7th Indian Divisions had hitherto formed 4 Corps, and 2nd British, 20th Indian and 5th Indian Divisions had formed 33 Corps. The change of plan, which Slim hoped completely to hide from the Japs, left 19th Division in the north with 2nd British and 20th Indian Divisions while 7th and 17th Indian Divisions and a number of other important units silently and secretly made their way south, down the west bank of the Myittha and Irrawaddy rivers towards Nyaung-U, near Pagan; there they composed the striking force for the attack across country on Meiktila. 5th Indian Division was in Army reserve behind 4 and 33 Corps. Meanwhile the illusion that 4 Corps was still active in the north of the Schwebo plain was maintained by giving the Japs over the radio the busy and complicated but in fact wholly faked wireless traffic of an imaginary 4 Corps.

By mid-January 19th Indian Division in the north, 2nd British Division south-east of Schwebo and 20th Indian Division in the confluence of the Irrawaddy and Chindwin were getting into position facing the Irrawaddy; 7th and 17th Indian Divisions and their accompanying units were on their way south to Nyaung-U, and Slim was in the position of which he wrote later in 'Defeat into Victory' p 406,

‘The Divisions of the Fourteenth Army were now, in the second week of January, approaching - or, in the case of the 19th Division, were actually on - the Irrawaddy along a front of over two hundred miles, from Wuntho in the north to Pakkoku in the south. The Japanese, as far as we knew, were still unaware of our change in plan and of the stealthy march of 4 Corps; their eyes, we hoped, were still fixed on Mandalay, not Meiktila. The stage was set for that most dramatic of all military operations - the opposed crossing of a great river.’

Slim’s strategy was to induce the Japanese to concentrate their strength against the divisions of 33 Corps ranged on the Irrawaddy shore from Wuntho to Myingyan, so leaving Meiktila weakly defended. His greatest single ally was mastery of the air: in the months to come the Japanese could be bombed and the Allies supplied from the air without fear of interference, for in the first half of 1945 there was in Burma no Japanese air attack of any significance.

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On the night of 21st January I was flown from Comilla to Schwebo. When I went on leave Schwebo had been in Japanese hands - but now it seemed that supply planes bringing reinforcements and men from leave were already landing there. At one side of the grass runway was a collection of bamboo huts, the despatch and reception office, where an Indian clerk twitched his head obligingly and said,

‘The Captain Sahib will not be here until nine hundred hours, Sahib. ‘He is taking breakfast.’

I lay on the ground in the shade of a pile of ration boxes until ‘The Captain Sahib’ should appear. No one knew where 7 IMFTU might be and I was advised to go to 33 Corps HQ at Ye-U to ask. There might, they said, be a truck going that way after lunch. I walked to the Mess, a Burmese house at some distance from the airstrip. The house was of two storeys and was made largely of teak. The walls were of teak frames filled in with cream-washed lath and plaster; the floors and ceilings were of bare teak beams and boards, and the steps to the lowest floor, several feet above ground level, were also of teak, and stoutly made. The garden was shaded with big trees through which I could see a white dusty road. Already the heat was taking all the

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

energy out of me and I was glad to sit indoors. I could hear the monotonous metallic 'tonk, tonk' of 'the coppersmith', the green barbet, whose call spoke of weariness and hot afternoons. In the room were other patient officers - asleep, reading paper-backs, or turning over the sheets of out-dated newspapers.

I got my lift in the back of a truck. The long straight road peeled away behind us, a narrow black streak edged with dusty yellow cart-tracks and shady tamarinds; beyond was the far horizon of the plain; above were blue sky and cumulus clouds. At Corps Headquarters the Deputy Assistant Director of Medical Services (DADMS) told me that 7 IMFTU was where I had left it; he promised me a lift there in a jeep that evening, and I asked him what Corps was doing about posting me to a more active unit.

Kalemyo was over 100 miles back and I fell asleep when we were about 15 miles from Kalewa, only waking when we rattled over the famous new Kalewa bridge, 'the longest Bailey bridge in the world'.

The part of Burma between the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy was low and undulating and variously wooded; there was dense jungle in places, open scrub or grass in others. In the dry season, December and January, it was very lovely, green and full of bird life, a Paradise.

Within a week, as was the army way, I was travelling through it again by jeep, on my way forward this time with the IMFTU to Sadaung, beyond Schwebo. We were in a long line of traffic driving through cool, wooded gorges with clear streams and fine sandstone cliffs; in places the road was supported by scaffolding on the faces of the cliffs. The dirt track had been made usable for a time by covering its surface with tarred hessian known as Bithess. Every few miles we stopped for one of those long halts that were usual when moving in convoy on a single track. During one halt at a dusty, hot place where we brewed tea all afternoon, I walked on after dark to discover why we were stopped. It was a place where the track dipped down into a small ravine and turned sharply before climbing the far side of the dip. A laden tank transporter was stuck at the bottom. Floodlights showed the tank, the trunks of jungle trees all round us, and a big recovery vehicle with a crane that had been backed down to hook on the transporter. The floodlit scene was dominated by a squat, powerful

figure dressed in dungarees and peaked baseball cap, unmistakably a Japanese, and as unmistakably American. He directed operations with vivid gestures, and in a loud, clear American voice. The tank and its transporter were hauled out and we moved on. From Ye-U the track followed the Mu canal where pied kingfishers hovered over the water. The commonest birds were the big vultures: they were all over the place, flocks of them feeding on bodies by the wayside or farther off, perching and quarrelling in the branches of trees. I stopped for a soldier who was thumbing a lift and when I asked the usual sort of question I found he was from Bangor in North Wales; we lapsed into Welsh; yes, he was in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (I knew they were in the 2nd British Division, not far away); he was in 'Animal transport' he said and looked after a mule. 30 years later we met again when I happened to be living at Bangor and his wife by chance was in our employ.

At Sadaung the original 7 IMFTU was together for the last time. On the second night we gave a party for John Wakeford: he was leaving in the morning to take over as CO of a General Hospital.

Sadaung was a pretty village and during the few days I was there I began to take lessons from Corporal Riley, the Anglo-Burman, in the Burmese language, lessons that were to be useful later on. He took me to see a dead pongyi or monk who had been pickled in some way; he was in a box and covered with ashes, only his blackened toes to be seen.

Wallace Parke acted as CO after John Wakeford had gone, and when a message came to say that 16 CCS at Schwebo was asking for another MO he sent me. I went reluctantly because I was still hoping to be transferred to a more active sort of life. 16 CCS became very busy when the Battle of the Irrawaddy Shore began but for the time being there was no work for anyone and I was appointed 'Resuscitation Officer', in charge of a small ward where the worst of the wounded would be treated before operation. An NCO called Faulkner was there; he had obviously been well trained and I sensed that he was going to cling ferociously to the system already in his head rather than follow the advice of a newcomer. It was a good system and I decided not to get in his way.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

In the Mess there was a Scot called Brown, the blood transfusion officer. I rather liked him. He had at one time been a film producer and he had a very confidential way of passing on information: 'Quite fantastic, old chap, and of course absolutely secret.'

A lot of new officers came in at the same time as me, two medical brigadiers, a dentist from Manchester who said 'O dear' whenever he was amused and a regular IAMC lieutenant colonel with a monocle. He kept the rum going round, said that every MO should do six years acclimatisation in India before going to the front, and advised abolition of the RAMC. He got on the nerves of some of the junior doctors and 'Stretcher Bearer Officers' who took him seriously. They talked a lot about a Sergeant Pyke who had not come back from leave; he was known to them as Sergeant 'fucking' Pyke because of the monotony of his language and it seemed that he had encountered a newly commissioned officer of the Women's Army Corps (India), (WACI), on Chowringhi (Calcutta's main street) and had failed to salute. She was Eurasian, very attractive as they often were, and smartly dressed, but touchy to a degree, as they also often were. When she pulled him up he retorted 'Salute yer, by Christ; you say fuckin' Salaam to me' and was now doing 28 days somewhere in 'the cooler'.

Also present was a young Scots major, a 'graded surgeon', sallow, grave and self-conscious - it was his first posting in the role. He wanted us to know whose house surgeon he had been, and he never smiled. By contrast at dinner I sat next to a man called Jock -

'I'm Jock ENSA. I'm supposed to entertain people. The lads, the BORs, are funny; the one thing they don't like is dirty stuff, you know.' He had a fund of wit and good humour but I was delighted when next day Terry rescued me from this dreary group. He came with a signal posting me to a fighting formation, the 20th Indian Division.



Chapter 15 The Myinmu Bridgehead

(111 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA)

At dawn I was climbing into the cockpit of an L5, the aeroplane that was to take me to Headquarters 20th Indian Division, 50 miles away at Monywa on the Chindwin. The plane was of the kind we used for evacuating the sick and wounded from near Tiddim. Behind the pilot there was room only for me and my bedding roll.

The pilot started the engine and we taxied off and rose into the air in one movement, with no pause; we flew low over the tree-tops and I could see houses and people, footpaths and cart tracks; we were low enough for me to pick out the different trees like mango and banana. I had never flown in a very small aeroplane and the experience was utterly different from being taken about as though by bus in a Dakota. It was 'real flying, like being a bird'. Sometimes I felt 'If we don't swoop up now we won't get over that next lot of trees'. The country was flat and rather bare except where dark clumps of bamboo and mango marked the sites of villages or tamarinds showed the line of a road. I leaned out of the open cockpit to look down and in doing this lost my cap over the side, so that at Monywa I reported to my new colonel, the Assistant Director of Medical Services (ADMS) hatless, 'improperly dressed'. Fortunately nobody, least of all Colonel Jackson, took notice of such a trifle, and it only bothered me when I had to return the smart salutes of the Gurkhas who seemed to be everywhere about the place. Monywa was more the size of a large village than a town. The buildings were damaged by shelling but there were enough left for Divisional Headquarters; the place had a brisk

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

and busy air very different from that of the units behind the lines to which I was accustomed. Everywhere on signposts and vehicles I saw the divisional sign: an arm brandishing a curved white sword on a black background.

Colonel Jackson was a big fair-haired Irishman in his late thirties. He was good-humoured and always came straight to the point; I liked him at once. At that time MOs in the Division were either on the strength of a Field Ambulance or were attached by the ADMS to a Regiment or Battalion. I always felt in practice more directly responsible to Jackson than to the CO of any unit to which I was posted. The crossing of the Irrawaddy by 20th Indian Division (Lieut-General Gracey) was to start in two days and Colonel Jackson was short of British MOs. He wasted no time: 'Get along to 111 Anti-Tank Regiment and tell them you're their new doctor. They're near Allagappa; there's some transport going down to the Field Ambulance there and you can go in that.'

The road was busy with jeeps and trucks and on every side I could see the signboards of units belonging to the Division. I got everywhere a deep impression of men quietly putting the last touches to their preparations for the battle. After nearly 30 miles I was put down by a signpost painted blue and red for Artillery. I walked along a dusty track between bushes to a group of tents marked RHQ for 'Regimental Headquarters'.

The Regiment had been raised in the West Country as a Territorial Anti-aircraft Unit: many of the men were from Devon and except for the CO and one or two others the officers were civilians who had learnt to be gunners. They were equipped with anti-tank guns and three-inch mortars, and in action they had two roles: sometimes with their anti-tank guns they were expected to hold off enemy tanks, and sometimes their batteries of mortars were on call to give supporting fire to the infantry.

The CO struck me as highly-strung, imperious and nervy, and his frequent smile made me write in a letter 'the smiler with the knife under the cloak.' He had a reputation for eccentricity based in part on his having laid out a golf course on which to practise firing his 3-in. mortars with live ammunition. He was generally known as 'The Mad

Mullah'. For the Irrawaddy crossing the whole of the artillery of XXXIII Corps was being made available to the Division and The Mad Mullah had been appointed to direct its fire to the far side of the river. His head was so full of the fact that he had been chosen to do this that he had little time to tell me anything except what a lot of fire power would be under his direction: four regiments of 25-pounders, a Medium regiment, Self-Propelled Guns and I forgot what else. For a week I saw no more of him and in his absence operational control of the Regiment was in the hands of a large, placid major called by everyone 'Jumbo'. He looked like a Jumbo and I felt that here was a man with whom you knew exactly where you were. His language was startling even by BOR standards and on the surface he seemed short-tempered; in fact he was kindly and good-natured and as far as I could judge good at his job. The men liked and respected him. 'Steve', the Adjutant, a man of say 30, had been a sheep-farmer in New Zealand. He was a Cornishman, tall, big-boned, dark, with high cheek-bones, a long jaw and a deep laughing voice. I liked him in small doses; he was cheery, forceful and quick, and he was never dull. The Quartermaster, Percy, or Captain Percival, was a regular soldier about 40 years of age who had just been given the MBE. He was taciturn but obliging; at times he seemed lacking in confidence and until we got to know each other I found him either a bit aggressive or quietly depressed. In appearance he was of medium height, fair, a bit paunchy, his back straight as a ruler. Ask him for something and you got a brusque, almost rude refusal: fifteen minutes later, and the thing for which you had asked was there. He knew that I had been mostly with Indian troops and he took the trouble tactfully to explain that managing the men from Devon might be different from managing Indians; he may have thought that I just shouted at Indians. He became one of the people I liked best. When I arrived everyone was in a whirl of business except the Padre. I was handed over to him to be shown round and to listen to his complaints of how out of everything he felt.

Regimental Headquarters was on flat ground about two miles from the Irrawaddy amongst scrubby bush and cactus. The earth was hard baked and the track which ran by the camp was deep in dust; tarpaulin shelters, guns hidden under camouflage netting, and gun-towing trucks which I learnt later to call 'Quads' were scattered here and there in the

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

dry scrub. The men and NCOs worked stripped to the waist, Warrant Officers wearing their badges of rank on cloth bands round their wrists. The imminence of action, the way in which every man seemed to be getting ready for a job he knew, made me glad to be one of them. The Schwebo I had left only that morning seemed far away and as much a base area as Comilla.

I took a jeep and went to introduce myself at the nearest Field Ambulance at Allagappa. There most of the talk was shop and local gossip - Bubonic plague had been diagnosed at Chaung-U, a village not far away; a Gurkha soldier had just been admitted with indigestion which his MO thought might be due to his having eaten a rat. I found the MO who had been with the Anti-tank Regiment before me; he was now MO of the 1st Devons. We talked of trivial things; I did not ask about the work.

Back at the Regiment I sensed that the arrival of a new MO was not looked on as a good omen. The men's work was over for the day and, seeing a motor-bike, I asked if someone would teach me to ride it. They all would - no problem, until I wanted to stop and no one had told me how. After several circuits through bushes and cactus one of the laughing men ran alongside and told me what to do. It took our minds off the days ahead.

I had at my disposal eight stretcher-bearers under Bombardier Lang. They were mostly Devon men, slow, solid, friendly, capable. As well as being expected to carry the wounded and apply dressings and splints they looked after the general arrangement of my Aid Posts and took care of the medical stores. Drugs, dressings, surgical instruments, splints - everything needed for the first crude treatment of the seriously wounded - were in one large box that could be carried on a mule or in the back of a truck. In another box was the usual supply of medicines for the day to day treatment of minor ailments, and in a third were 'Medical Comforts', the best known of which were a few bottles of spirits.

My bedding was unrolled for me that first night in a shallow pit, and I found my personal belongings - mug, knife, fork and spoon, tin hat and a steel ammunition box in which I had a few books and papers - arranged nearby within reach. Alone, I had time to think about the

immediate future and before it was dark I wrote a couple of short letters. One was to my mother; I tried to put in it the love I felt for her, without giving her any reason to worry more than usual about me. The other was to a friend of both of us, and to him I quoted Milton's Samson - 'Happen what may, of me expect to hear, etc', saying that I wished I felt like Samson. No lights or noise were allowed so near the river and soon all was dark and silent. I felt at home and among friends. I lay awake a good deal hearing from time to time the crackle of small arms fire, sometimes far, sometimes nearer, and wondering if it meant anything for me. I reflected that whatever lay ahead I probably had only myself to blame for being where I was.

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Gracey's plan for 20th. Indian Division was that one of its three brigades should cross the Irrawaddy near Myinmu and gain a footing opposite. A second brigade was to do the same a few miles downstream. These two brigades would make a firm bridgehead which would entice the Japanese to attack in strength.

The Division's third brigade, hitherto in reserve, would then also cross into the bridgehead and break out to the east to lead a 50-mile drive by the whole Division to Kyaukse. Kyaukse, 25 miles south of Mandalay, was on a main road and railway and its capture would add to the dislocation of Japanese communications in Central Burma which Slim meant to bring about by taking Meiktila. These plans, like Slim's larger plan to take Rangoon before the rains, were of course unknown to those like me who lived from day to day and moved under orders.

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On the morning of the second day before the crossing I was at Regimental Headquarters when Jumbo who was now Acting CO came to me with my orders. I was to go with Major Haden's battery of three-inch mortars that would be firing at targets on the bridgehead from Satpangon, a village on our side of the river three or four miles beyond Allagappa. There were a few houses at Satpangon and some pagodas damaged by shellfire; the river bank there was in general high and steep but close to the village a rough track led to the water's edge and Satpangon had been chosen as the embarkation point for the first

troops to cross. Weapon pits for our mortars had already been dug near the pagodas; the position was screened by a few trees from the river and from the far bank, but it was likely to be shelled when the enemy pin-pointed it. Jumbo had the knack of making you feel that your job mattered and that he cared personally about your fate. He said he wanted me to be with the battery that was going to fire from the village from which the crossing was going to be made;

‘It’ll make a hell of a difference to have you there. I hate doing it straight away like this, Doc, when you’ve only just come, but it’ll mean a hell of a lot to those blokes.’

He added thoughtfully,

‘You’ll be shelled to buggery.’

I warmed to old Jumbo and would have jumped to do anything he asked. Now he was only expecting me to go with Haden’s battery and look after them at Satpangon. I collected what kit I thought I should need and went to introduce myself to the Battery Commander. Bill Haden was a schoolmaster by profession, gentlemanly and reserved, much liked and respected and known to the men as Major Aden.

We moved off before dusk and parked our trucks for the night on open, uneven ground a mile and a half from the river bank. Some gunners put barbed wire round the camp; the need for secrecy made us speak in low voices. After dark, a supply party started for Satpangon; some had mortars on their backs and pulled behind them a handcart full of mortar bombs. They shuffled off in the direction of a lane sunk between high banks. It was a relief when someone silently handed me a mug of tea. A dog howled in the village, then all was quiet again. The minutes passed with great slowness. I leant against a jeep and stared at the stars, Orion in a clear sky, but my mind was up the lane. Half an hour passed. There was no reason for anxiety except that all was so new to me. Five minutes later there was a dull explosion.

‘That’s near where they are.’ I asked what it was. ‘A grenade.’

A whispered argument followed. ‘Was it one of ours or one of theirs?’

Had they run into Japs or into one of our own patrols? We waited, all on edge. Another half hour passed, the silence broken only by whispered conjectures. Then a scared-looking officer appeared and gave us news: a grenade had been thrown from the bank at the side of the lane and had just missed the handcart of mortar bombs. Five men were injured and when they limped back I had them helped into the back of a covered truck. We let down the canvas flap so that no light showed when I examined them with a torch. Three, including the Battery Sergeant Major, were bad enough for me to want to get them to the Main Dressing Station at Allagappa. If I had had more experience I should have told the Battery Commander that I could look after them where they were till daylight and they would do very well, but I told him that they ought to be at the MDS and he at once drove them to Allagappa in his jeep. The night was dark and it was quite possible that he might run into Japs: we knew that there was at least one party of them prowling about on our side of the river.

Two hours later he was back, having had no trouble, but we heard next morning that during the night eight Indian soldiers had been ambushed on that same piece of road. I slept under a tree near one of the trucks, pistol by my side, and the rest of the night passed quietly.

In the morning, hidden by long reed-like elephant grass, we moved up on foot to join the rest of the Battery at Satpangon. The heat was trying and I had a feeling that we were moving inevitably towards the edge of events that one part of me dreaded. The first troops were to cross the Irrawaddy as soon as it was dark. An irritating jig which I could not stop kept running in my head, 'You've had it. You've had it, you silly old bugger, you've had it!' There was no comfort for me in reminding myself that I had got into this job by my own meddling.

I found a pagoda with room enough inside for me to use it as my Regimental Aid Post. There were several pagodas like it; they stood on square plinths and were 20 or 30 feet high, white, round, tapering - in their way, I supposed, beautiful. Some had been damaged by shells or bombs, and bits of plaster, rubble and gilded ornaments lay about on the ground. A few steps led up to each pagoda and low white-washed walls, now partly destroyed, surrounded them. Inside, on a sort of altar, was a Buddha, about twice man-size, flanked by two

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

smaller plaster figures kneeling with hands raised palm to palm in adoration. There was room enough inside for four of us, and while my three stretcher-bearers, Lofty Freeman, Dolbear and Payne, were setting out the medical gear I went out to look about me and to let everyone know where I could be found when needed.

All about us men were making final adjustments to the placing of their mortars. The range to targets across the river might be two to three miles and they were going to use for the first time some new long-range mortar bombs. The bank beyond the screen of trees fell abruptly 30 feet to the water's edge; the stream ran smoothly at two to three knots; on the far side, nearly a mile away, I could see a shelving beach. Beyond the beach the land was low-lying and covered with long straw-coloured elephant grass. Here and there dark green patches marked clumps of trees - villages. All was unbelievably quiet, peaceful. From the pagodas a track led down to the water and I found it difficult to believe that three weeks earlier, almost to the day, 24 cornered Japs, weighed down by full equipment, had committed suicide here by marching straight into the river. The hot afternoon passed slowly. All I could do was sit about, read a bit, write a note now and then and talk and listen. Sitting on some rubble under the placid eye of a Buddha on a plinth in the open I heard how cider was made on Devon farms. 'Thar i'nt any drugged ztuff, 'tis the real thing, Zurr.' By then we were so hot and tired that there was no tension in the air.

'Ere's Major Aden, Zurr.' The Battery Commander was going round his men. Dark haired, of medium height, rather stocky, a calm, solid sort of man. He was imperturbable, absolutely. A scholar, and a bit reserved; I wanted to know him better. He sat down by me and began to fill his pipe - 'Wills' Cut Golden Bar' I thought, I must see if he has any to spare; other men's tobacco always smelt better than my own tasted. He wore no shirt and I noticed a big scar where his left kidney would be; it must have been an ugly wound - shell splinters, I later discovered, at Bishenpur, in the previous year's battle for Imphal.

'You know, Doc,' he turned towards me, 'they're a good lot of chaps but... Well, sometimes in a hot spot you can give one of them an order: it's urgent - you know what I mean - and what happens? It has to sink in; he has to think about it, then he says "Ar, I zee what

you mean, Zurr. Ar, Ah'll do that.” The Major, detached in a way as I was, a spectator of himself and of all that went on around him, was all the time measuring the honest efforts of the citizen soldiers doing their best in a world strange to them; he was measuring their efforts against the professionalism of the regular soldiers with whom we lived and fought - Gurkhas, Indians and what remained of regular troops in the British battalions. ‘These chaps of mine, Doc,’ he went on, ‘insist on doing what they’ve been taught is “a prarper jarb” and “a prarper jarb” is oiling and polishing their beloved guns, not messing about with “ranging” and “bearings” and all that nonsense.’ When he left to go on with his round, I thought about my own small section. I had already found that quickness was not their strong point, though they were quick enough when it came to wondering whether someone was being funny at their expense. They reminded me of the advice never to be funny until you had first made friends, and ‘never, ever to be funny with the Regimental Sergeant Major.’ I was beginning to get to know and like them; they were anxious about their mates with the anti-tank guns: their mates would be going over the river with the infantry and would be close to the enemy when fighting began. ‘It’s deadly,’ they said when something was bad. When it was past endurance - the ultimate horror was - ‘deadly’. It might rarely be ‘fucking’ deadly, but not when they were in earnest; then it was deadly, yes, deadly.

Mugs of sweet milky tea came up, gloriously hot tea that made the sweat run off us in streams a few minutes after drinking it. There was everywhere a sort of false calm. One of the gunners lying on the ground in front of me, his mug of tea between his hands, suddenly looked up and said

‘We’m right ‘appy yurr, Zurr.’ Later came a shout of ‘Karner’s up’ - ‘Karner’, the British soldier’s mangled version of the Urdu for Food. A gunner brought me a plate of stew and some biscuits; we shared the night’s issue of rum and at nightfall took our places in the pagoda, stretchers propped in a corner, the stretcher-bearers’ Sten guns against the walls. There had been fighting here in the past month and as darkness fell I began to notice the sweetish smell that rises at night from the bodies of the dead.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

When it was dark men of the Border Regiment filed silently down to the water's edge and began to cross; they were followed after midnight by a battalion of the Frontier Force Rifles, and the battle of the Myinmu bridgehead began.

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I did not try to keep a day-to-day account of what happened during the next few days; they passed, a mixture of fear, work and long waits. I was sometimes on one side of the river and sometimes on the other. I jotted down notes from time to time on odd scraps of paper. I wanted to remember everything. The waiting in the pagoda at Satpangon seemed interminable; it was hot even in the shade inside the pagoda, but infinitely worse in the glare outside. In the pagoda I sat looking at Buddha clasping a half empty tin of bully beef and a packet of biscuits; one of his plaster acolytes wore Payne's bush hat tilted at a rakish angle. Around us on the floor were half empty mugs of tea, crawling with flies. My Red Cross haversack ready for going out to the wounded stood beside Buddha on the 'altar'; Sten guns belonging to Dolbear, Payne and Lofty Trueman were propped against the pagoda walls. The stretcher bearers I had met at Regimental HQ belonged to other batteries and were on the bridgehead with gun crews. As we listened to the battle developing we wondered what was happening to them. Now and then, to make conversation, I would say, 'Well, Lofty, tell us how you enlisted', and if anyone came into the pagoda we would push over a packet of biscuits and say 'Sit down - cut yourself a piece of cake'. Our mortars were firing day and night as called for, and so was Corps artillery from farther back. We were shelled a little in the mornings and evenings and I got to know the sounds of the Jap guns and the low rhythmic whirring of shells coming our way. From over the water came the noise of small arms, of different kinds of machine gun. The men identified them for me: 'That's an LMG, Sir' (Light Machine Gun).

'There's one of our Brens. Listen.' 'Medium Machine Gun now, Sir.' and so on. Bangs of all kinds came from different directions as attacks and counter-attacks were mounted, grew in intensity and died away.

There were large numbers of Japs in the villages and long grass on the other side of the river; I watched what was called 'softening up.' Squadrons of Liberators flew over and plastered the ground with bombs. Hurribombers followed and did an 'air-strike' on a tiny village without a name just across the river from me. I wondered how anyone with imagination could possibly take it - or, for that matter, give it. It was horrible to watch at close quarters. Sometimes I felt hollow inside and I could feel my heart thump; my mouth was dry and above all there was the fear of showing any sign of fear. To have work was a relief because when idle and waiting we had time to brood. We felt resentment at blunders which killed or wounded our own men, and resentment against those high up who had no bond of sympathy and understanding with us but sent us to places and expected much of us. I was grateful for the loving-kindness of Jumbo and the soothing outward tranquillity of 'the Major'. I hoped desperately that the MO too was displaying a soothing outward tranquillity.

Watching my companions as I sat outside the pagoda in the cool of morning or went round the men as they worked on their mortars I noticed how, during the quiet after a few shells had dropped, one of the Troop commanders, a lieutenant, talked far too much and his men doubled the quiet obscenities that were a part of their daily speech. So they made the formless terror we all knew seem less important than the defined immediate discomfort or nuisance.

One morning when I was cleaning my teeth I looked up at aeroplanes overhead and was startled to see red discs on their wings: they were Jap fighter-bombers - Oscars. Surprised, we all scrambled into slit-trenches.

They dropped a few bombs and used their machine-guns but did not do much harm.

After dark on the second night I stood by the track that led to the river and watched a battalion of Gurkhas going down to the boats. They were an impressive very solemn little crowd with white tapes sewn on their behinds so that they would not shoot each other by mistake in the dark. Instead of the usual cheery smile there was on each face a look of grim purpose.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

The nights were the worst times, the times of most tension. We four in the pagoda kept watch in turn for intruders; when it was my turn I dozed off and woke at intervals with a guilty start. The slightest noise made us wonder - What was that? Who was it? To pass the time the men told in low voices tales about waiting in ambush at night in the Kabaw valley - 'We used to call it Death Valley. There were no birds there. We'd sit waiting in the dark for them to come down the track and one of those damn great leaves (you know, Sir, off the teaks) would drop - and you'd jump out of your skin - then you'd settle down again and listen once more to the drip, drip off the branches.' Now and then beleaguered troops being attacked in villages on the bridgehead called for defensive fire and the whole battery would blast off with stunning noise a salvo to destroy Japs forming up to attack. Behind us, the Corps artillery thundered and flashed in the dark night. By day, to while away the heat of the afternoon, I listened to a Troop Commander describing the individual Jap as a fanatical and desperate fighter who would stick it out until his ammunition or his body gave out. He told me about the mortars and said that when firing at ranges up to 2,500 yards they were accurate enough, without dropping bombs on our infantry, to destroy Japs forming up outside a village that we occupied. Later I was to recall and doubt his assurance.

When I went over the river to visit gun crews in the villages I crossed on rafts powered by outboard motors. The rafts were made of beams and planks laid across iron pontoons which the Japs had used as assault boats. The first time I crossed I shared one of the pontoon rafts with several soldiers and two mules. As soon as we left the shore the mules gave trouble and a British soldier and I climbed off the planks into the end of the pontoon to get as far away from them as possible. One mule glared round showing a lot of the whites of its eyes and unsteadily backed a hind leg down into the pontoon a few feet from us; we each put a leg over the side ready to slip into the water. It was the kind of thing that took away any romantic feeling I might have had about rafting across one of the great rivers of the world. The crossing took twenty minutes. On the far side I found what was sometimes called 'a bit of a huddle', the beach busy with the landing of men, guns, mules and supplies. Only in one place was there the outward appearance of calm, a small oasis of quiet where an MO from the Field Ambulance had set up an Advanced Dressing Station; it was in

the shelter of the bank where the level of the land dropped a few feet to the shore. A tarpaulin had been rigged to give shade and several soldiers lay quietly on stretchers waiting their turn to go back over the river. The MO was bent over a man half stripped to show a shoulder torn by a shell. The images of that day stayed for ever with me - the stuff of a doctor's nightmare: a beach where a canvas stretcher was the operating table, the grey clammy skin of the shocked man, a race for life between blood plasma pouring in and the bright blood pumping out, an artery somewhere deep inside. I did what I could to help and went on to look for my gunners.

The bridgehead was in a gentle bend of the Irrawaddy where the river which had run west from Mandalay for 50 miles turned south-west towards Myingyan. The ground was flat and sandy, and covered with elephant grass. It was seamed with sand-filled chaungs or water-courses, at that season dry. In the bend of the main river were several small villages, not one of them more than 300 yards from end to end: Yekadipa near where I landed, Lingadipa half a mile downstream, and Kanlan, Gaungbo, Talingon and Sinbyugon all slightly inland but none more than five miles from the river. To gain and hold the bridgehead, the Division had to capture these villages and then hold them against counter-attack, and each village in turn became the scene of a minor battle or series of battles. Names like Sindat (Elephant camp) and Talingon (Threshing-floor) which might in happier times have conjured up images of tranquil village life came to have dreadful overtones and lingered as 'names of bitter memory' in the minds even of men who were hardened to war. There were fires everywhere and a column of smoke meant the site of what had been a village. In hamlets that lately had been leisured and smiling, as I had seen Sadaung, I picked my way between slit trenches, bunkers, wire and all the litter of battle. Trees were broken and houses destroyed and charred, and in the air lingered the stale wet reek of smouldering fires; it mingled with the stench of the dead.

In the confusion of noise and movement and rumour I was often surprised by islands of stillness where, in low voices over mugs of tea, a gunner and I would talk of his home, his family. There I could write, or read, or dream, and share with another as much of myself as I chose. These unreal calms were due not so much to pauses in the

fighting as to the movement of the action, now here, now there, so that a man might find himself suddenly remote from it and willing to withdraw for the moment into a remembered or imagined other life. Some incidents, either because they were macabre or painfully close to us, were special, like watching a section with flame-throwers burn Japs out of long grass or out of bunkers; others were absurd, like listening to the wireless news. The BBC was always good for a sour laugh when you were yourself at the place described. On the 18th. February we heard on the wireless that there was 'a new beachhead west of Myinmu'. 'The first crossing,' said the voice, 'was made by three swimmers; rafts powered by outboards followed, planes roaring low overhead to drown the noise of motors.' The only swimmers of whom we knew were some whose raft overturned on a sandbank, and we were sure that we had heard no 'planes roaring low overhead'.

Some of the fiercest fighting on the bridgehead centred round the two villages Kanlan-Ywathit and Talingon, which were occupied by the Frontier Force Rifles and Gurkhas respectively. Anti-tank guns with these battalions formed part of the perimeter defence of each village and there some of our gunners became casualties when the Japs attacked in force on successive nights. Two gunners were killed defending their 6-pounder when their position was overrun at Kanlan Ywathit; the gun was recaptured in the morning when, out of 179 Jap bodies counted on the perimeter, it was found that 30 were in the area immediately in front of the gun. On the next night four more gunners were killed and four wounded at Talingon with the 4th/10th Gurkhas. Their gun also was overrun in the night, but the sergeant in charge was able to remove the breech-block, making the gun unusable by the enemy. That gun too was recaptured in the morning and put into action although the Japs had fixed a mine to it and stuffed the barrel with grenades. The fighting round these villages was very fierce and close-to: take, re-take, and take again, and at Talingon alone when at last the village was cleared on the 26th February the Gurkha battalion which had held it counted over 500 enemy bodies. I did not hear anyone during those days use the word prisoner; it was not a word in anyone's mind. No one expected if overrun to be taken prisoner and no one expected any Jap to let himself be taken alive.

A week after the first crossings the battle had moved out of range of our mortars at Satpangon and I moved to the bridgehead for good. The Mad Mullah was now back with the Regiment and he set up what he called 'Tac HQ' - Tactical Headquarters - half a mile south of the river near a small village which on our map had no name; it was about half way between Yekadipa and Alethaung. The CO, Adjutant, RSM and a few signallers and drivers would be at Tac HQ and I decided to stay there too as it was a convenient centre. We were a dozen in all and lived in slit trenches. The ground was flat and the soil dry and sandy. We had a bit of barbed wire round the camp. At night I felt naked on this bare open patch of ground; except for the wire we had no defence. At dusk and before dawn we 'stood to', armed, tin hat on, alert for a surprise attack. At last light I thought to myself, 'There is Venus now in the sky over the barbed wire. When will the first shot of an evening "jitter party" ring out? Will anything dreadful have happened before the planet is out of sight?' Every evening I watched Venus like this. I found nights at the unnamed village for some reason tense, each of the first three nights worse than the one that went before. Yet nothing happened, nothing at all. I thought 'Jitter' a very expressive word; a 'jitter party' was a small patrol sent out by Japs to harass with random shots, grenades and sometimes shouts. They made the inexperienced tense and worried; sometimes positions were given away by returning the random shots. When all was quiet I listened for sounds outside the wire. Was someone there? Half a dozen? 50 perhaps? No one at all? One night as we waited and listened a lonely voice out of the dark cried 'Help, help'. He was a lost swimmer from 2nd British Division which was crossing the Irrawaddy higher up near Mandalay. Someone fetched him in. He had been seven hours in the water.

I shared a trench with the CO at Tac HQ. There was more space in it than in a slit-trench and when we came down after 'stand to' on the first night Steve, the adjutant, joined us. He produced a bottle of gin and I had chocolate from home to share out; after the CO had taken some tobacco off me to fill his pipe we started to talk. The trench was five feet deep and big enough for three or four to sit together; during the time I shared it with the Mad Mullah I got to know this strange man a bit and up to a point to like him. 'I have always,' he started off, 'got what I wanted, Doc. Made a point of it, you know.' He was one

of the two children of a widow and was, I suspected, rather spoilt, for the other child was a girl. He had always had the best of everything, he told me - had gone out of his way to get it. He was tallish and very slight and had 'always been a good athlete - boxer, polo-player, pig-sticker', though to me he did not look it at all. He had a lean hungry face, light brown downy hair and light blue rather prominent eyes. He was brisk and testy in manner, conceited, dogmatic and condescending. His brain was lively enough but he seemed to have no idea of what his officers and men were thinking and feeling. I was surprised when he told me that he had 'More experience of handling men than anyone else in the world', for he harassed and interfered with those under him until they were wildly exasperated. He didn't bother me much for he confined his advice to me on medical matters to saying, 'Must see they get vitamins, Doc. Must see they get vitamins. Get them to dig up peanuts. They're all round them in the ground. Get them to dig up peanuts.'

For two more weeks the battles for the small villages continued. The CO in his jeep visited in turn the villages where there were anti-tank guns manned by his men. I had no jeep of my own so I went with him; he sat in front with his driver and I sat behind with his body-guard Busty Peacock, a large amiable man with a Sten gun. I had by now exchanged my revolver for a rifle, with which I was more at home. By day there were many quiet spells and I saw more of Bill Haden. His battery was near Yekadipa and when I found him there he was sitting on the edge of a slit trench, unruffled as usual, measuring every enigmatic word he uttered, and systematically reading through his India paper air-mail edition of The Times which was delivered with his letters.

'Look at these chaps, Doc.' He gave a slightly incredulous laugh. 'Absolutely ordinary blokes, citizen soldiers, and yet they treat in a totally matter-of-fact way days and nights of killing and being killed.'

I enjoyed the relaxation of his company and we did a lot of talking, but I discovered very little about him then except that he too had been at Oxford, at Wadham. How far away now all that was! I began to jot down absurd and banal comparisons on little bits of paper - Oxford and Yekadipa, the Cherwell and the Irrawaddy, leisured speculation and crude slaughter. My real life had contrasts enough

without such imaginings, one minute admiring the kingfishers and terns sweeping and hovering over the river, the next doing what I could for a wounded man; one day stealing to the river with some gunners and a few grenades to catch fish for our dinner, and the next at Talingon viewing the heaps of blackened half-digested Japanese corpses.

On 27th February the 1st Battalion of The Devons relieved the Gurkhas at Talingon and brought bulldozers to dispose of the bodies and clean up the place. I watched the Gurkhas march from the stinking filthy village where night after night for a week they had repelled the fiercest attacks; they might have been coming off some ceremonial parade, they looked so spick and span, their uniform cared for and their weapons clean.

East of our camp near Yekadipa was a village called Sindat. When the Border Regiment took it they were supported by a troop of anti-tank guns and I went with them to a point where from the shade of a thorn bush I could see what was going on. I could see a dark-robed figure in the open, sometimes crouching, sometimes moving on; it was a Roman Catholic padre, a man always to the front, respected by all, and now during the attack giving comfort to the dying.

When I could I sought the shade of trees but except in villages there were few trees on the bridgehead. February was the middle of Burma's dry season between the cool months and the hot season, and although I was too cold to sleep at night after five a.m. even with a pullover and blanket, by noon the temperature was already creeping up towards the 100 degree mark. But the climate was not uncomfortable: the air was dry and in spite of the heat I found that I had plenty of energy to dig a slit trench. To be near the river was a delight - sweaty and dusty we would strip off our clothes and swim, and when we had done that and thrown in some grenades we would go in again to collect the floating catch. At night, back in the trench at Tac HQ, as we listened to battles round this or that village I heard more about the CO's early life. He told me how as a subaltern in India he ran a pig-sticking club; he said that it was a point of honour with pig-sticking clubs to chase any animal they flushed: one club was disgraced because the members refrained (very sensibly, I thought) from chasing a tiger which they put up. I had to admit that dull and conventional as

many of the British I had met in India had seemed to me, there was there a fine tradition of courage and personal honour. The Mad Mullah could be friendly when he wanted to, as when one night he said to me, 'Doc, you old cockyolly bird, I think you're rather enjoying yourself here aren't you.' He was right, of course, for I wrote home at the time, 'I can't say much about my job except that that there have been moments satisfying as I could never imagine a job would be.' Although there were moments of boredom (no one in the Army escaped that) the job opened my eyes to what the men put up with and said very little about, something I could not have understood without sharing their life. There were plenty of minor ailments to treat but my usefulness was more in being present than in anything I did; it was in being with the men, advising occasionally about little things and being available in case of serious injury. The life of movement suited me, and the life in the open; I learnt about people and about myself. It was amazing how many friendships sprang up under those conditions and did so quickly; a man very soon got to know on whom he could and could not rely. I found that physical fear was not so formidable to me as fear of censure, fear of admitting that I wasn't as good as I wanted to be. I could remember being more frightened of making speeches than of anything on the bridgehead.

On the 1st March our rear echelon crossed the river and the whole of Regimental Headquarters assembled and got dug in near the village of Bethaung close to the river, a little to the east of where I first landed.

Early in the day I had been looking down at one of our lads after a Medium Machine Gun killed him. Moments earlier he had been a young man I knew, full of go. I hated the black holes with ragged edges, the torn skin grey like putty. I hated death by machine gun. In the afternoon I borrowed the Padre's jeep and took Bombardier Lang with me to Kanlan and Yezin with medical stores: that morning there had been a scrap there. On the way I heard that Colonel Whitehead, CO of one of the Gurkha battalions, had been killed by a stray shell and I had a vivid picture of watching him earlier as he calmly directed affairs from a low ridge near the beach - but any ridge was conspicuous in that flat land.

On the 2nd March we were shelled at RHQ during the night and the CO was more than usually fussy in the morning. The Regiment took his ways very hard. The presence of this unpopular and eccentric meddler seemed to me to irritate nearly everyone. I got on well enough with him because his meddling with my affairs was trifling and well-meaning, and consisted only of telling me to encourage everyone to eat corn on the cob, young beans and peanuts, of which there were plenty in the ground. 'Must see they get vitamins, Doc. Must see to it.' At RHQ my men dug and roofed a small bunker that would do for a four-bedded ward - that is, would take four stretchers; it only ever had one patient in it, the CO. When we had finished the bunker we took the rest of the morning off to go swimming and fishing. Two handsome kinds of black tern could always be seen flying backwards and forwards over the water at that place. One was small and graceful, and had a black belly; I found later that it was known to ornithologists, reasonably enough, as the black-bellied tern. Drawn up on the shore were a number of country boats beautifully built of teak; near them a bull terrier called 'Gunner' belonging to one of the Battery Captains was busy making advances to a lovely golden setter called Sue. She, all silk and grace, belonged to the Adjutant, Steve, who was very fussy about her and always insisted that she wore specially constructed baffling drawers when she might be on heat. As I lay idly on the sand I could hear the swish of the terns' wings, and the low voices of the men, 'effing' and 'blinding' without emphasis. It was one of those intervals of quiet in our lives.

Next day the CO came to me in the evening for 'a pill'. He had stomach ache. He called me again at 2300 and I thought he might perhaps have appendicitis. At 0330 he called me once more so I moved him to my roofed-over sandy dugout to look at him with a torch. He was a bit worse and as by now he had taken more pills I got a jeep and took him over the river to the Field Ambulance. Two Gurkhas came with us as escort and we reached Allagappa at 0600. John Bruce, Consulting Surgeon XIVth Army, happened to be there and took out the appendix at 0800, after breakfast. All was set out in the big tents of the Field Ambulance as in any operating theatre in a civilian hospital, and the atmosphere was much the same - only the patient was tense. Bruce did his best to make him relax by relating an

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

old chestnut about lying back and enjoying rape. The joke got him nowhere with the Mad Mullah who gave him a suspicious look.

As the anaesthetic began to work, I watched, fascinated, a last admonitory gesture of the Mullah's right arm and hand, forefinger characteristically outstretched and pointing as even there he laid down the law. I crossed back over the river during the morning and found that Jumbo had assumed command. I felt that already perhaps I had done a good day's work.

I went on to Yezin in the afternoon, taking the Padre with me. We had mortars at Yezin, and fighting was still going on in places along the south east limit of the bridgehead, roughly from Sinbyugon to Mayogon. I meant to stay the night and before dark we did some digging to deepen a bunker for our own protection. The Regiment also had mortars and guns at Mayogon and Kanlan, and so next morning, the 5th March, before returning to Bethaung I visited them too. When I got back to Regimental Headquarters at 1530 I noticed a big man with red tabs on him talking to Jumbo. Then I saw it was my ADMS and went over to him. He had come to say that I was to leave the gunners right away and go as MO to the Devons. According to the ADMS they had had a bad time in the last few days with shelling and mortar fire and their MO had been posted elsewhere. 'I want the best chap for them I can lay hands on' he said, - a tough MO who will stand no nonsense.' He said that they were at Sinbyugon and that I was to go right away. His words pleased me and made me uneasy at the same time, like when Jumbo said it would mean a lot to the men and we'd be shelled to buggery. They were good at handling people, those two.

I hurriedly packed my belongings, borrowed a jeep with a driver to bring it back, and by 1700 was at Sinbyugon.



Chapter 16 The Devons (1)

‘You’d better get over there right away’ had made me wonder what I should find; Sinbyugon was very like other villages I had seen, a few smoking bamboo houses, a clump of trees, some trenches and a lot of wire. I said, ‘I’m the new MO’ and I was shown into a large dugout which was covered with a tarpaulin so that lights would not show. Colonel Jones was a tall, thin man with a stoop; he wore steel-rimmed spectacles and looked ill and harassed. He might, I thought, be an obstinate man. He was standing with his Company Commanders and others, going over the orders for an attack at dawn on a village to the east of us. They were grouped round a table on which a map was spread, looking at it by the light of a hurricane lamp; outside in the open it was already beginning to grow dark.

I missed the friendly welcome I remembered having had from the gunners. These men were busy and worried. The battalion had been under fire off and on for the last seven days: it was not to be expected that in the few hours between recovery from making one attack and getting ready to launch the next, they would have time for a stranger, a new MO, but I thought all the same that I had landed amongst a queer lot. I had already been told that I was to take the place of an MO who, after a night of shelling during which there had been casualties in his Aid Post, had said that he could not go on. Morale in the battalion was supposed not to be good and the sick rate was high. I had been told that I was not only to look after the wounded but to cut down the numbers sent back each day because of complaints that were due mainly to fear and strain.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

The village we were to take in the morning was Nyaunglebin; we were then to move on to Paunggadaw, three miles to the south-east, and take that as well. I needed to know about the plans so that I could make my arrangements to receive casualties, and I asked a few questions. I had to decide where to put the Regimental Aid Post (RAP) and make sure that others knew where it would be. After hearing the plans for taking Nyaunglebin and Paunggadaw I chose a suitable place and told the CO. He did not disagree. Did he care? I wondered. Anyway, he left it, without comment, to me, and I went off to look for the MO's staff. They must have been wondering if I was going to show up at all.

The next day's attack was to be the start of 'the break-out' from the bridgehead, the beginning of an advance which was to take three weeks and bring the Division to the outskirts of Kyaukse, forty miles on.

The Devons had been stationed in India for 15 years and some of the men had been 'out east' a long time. The battalion had been in Burma and Manipur since the beginning of 1943, first in the Kabaw Valley and later in the jungle-covered hills between Palel and Tamu. It was one of the battalions which fought on the Shenam Pass and 'Nippon Hill'. Afterwards it had helped to clear the jungles round Ukhrul and in the autumn of 1944 had been withdrawn for a rest. At the end of 1944 it had returned to Burma with 80 Brigade when 20th Indian Division began to move south to Monywa and into the country between the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy.

New men had come to take the place of those lost by illness and enemy action; the CO of the days on the Tamu Road had gone, as had many others, including the MO. Many officers, NCOs and men remained, veterans of the previous year's battles, men who remembered the weariness and the sickness and the ferocity of hand to hand fighting; but there were also many new to war, men for whom a few recent patrols and a skirmish or two had been their only preparation for the battles of the bridgehead and for encounters with Japanese who were on the defensive and well dug in.

After the meeting under the tarpaulin I went to make myself known to the 'MI Room' staff, as they were called. There were more

of them on the establishment than I had had with the gunners. Sergeant May was senior, then two corporals and nineteen others, most of whom I attached as stretcher-bearers to individual companies as there was need, holding back one or two at the RAP to help me and Sgt May. I also had a batman who acted as one of the RAP or MI Room staff, and I had four jeep ambulances with drivers. Two of these belonged to the battalion and two were lent by the American Field Service (AFS). Of the AFS men one was Dinwiddie Smith from New Jersey whom I already knew; he was a small boat sailor who 'did something' in Wall St.; the other was The Reverend Custer Watson, a very young man whose heart was in the right place but who later provoked me to say, 'For Christ's sake, man, put that Bible away and bandage his wounds; he won't need the Bible if you stop the bleeding.' Danny James of the AFS had been so exasperated by him that he complained,

'Can't he wipe that silly grin off his face and call me a bleedin' son of a bitch or sump'n. Just once. It'd ease the tension.'

Each jeep ambulance was fitted with a steel frame to carry two stretchers, one above the other, and there was room also for someone to sit behind the driver. I always tried to keep two jeep ambulances at the RAP so that I could quickly send the most urgent cases to the rear.

An important member of my section was the battalion water corporal, a stout-hearted laughing man called Stoffles, who wore a peacock feather in his bush hat and was in charge of the water-cart. He was responsible to me for seeing that the battalion was supplied with drinking water and that the water, whether he got it from a village well or from a convenient stream, was properly disinfected with chlorine, using the 'Horrocks Box', which I now met in use for the first time. I had not seen one since I left Crookham.

Sgt May was my right-hand man. He was short, wiry and thin. He wore steel-rimmed glasses and had a peaky face. He was a Londoner and in politics an outspoken Communist. He was an intelligent, bitter man of 27 with no illusions and no toleration of the weak-kneed or neurotic: I thought this rather a defect but it was very useful to me in sorting out the genuinely ill from the faint-hearted and from those likeable 'old soldiers' who were not quite malingerers, but

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

liked to know just how far they could go with a new MO Sgt May knew every man in the battalion. We got to like each other and I greatly respected him. He knew his job and the other men respected him. That first night all I could do was to explain to him what we should be doing next day.

Before first light there was a bit of a scare: a patrol reported Japanese tanks in Nyaunglebin village. This was a false alarm; they were tanks which had been destroyed by RAF Hurribombers a few days earlier. They were derelict and Nyaunglebin was clear. We moved off at 0600 and later I and my section - ambulances, equipment and a few men - had a long wait in the open while the leading company cleared Paunggadaw two miles farther on. I found some shade at the side of a small bush by a tuft of elephant grass. The day was very hot and I felt sick. To pass the time I started to read a pocket Hamlet. A letter from home fell from between the pages and I re-read that instead - it was easier than Hamlet. Shells began to fall on the track behind us and later, when we had moved into Paunggadaw, on the village. It surprised me how many could fall without anyone being hurt.

The country before us to the south and east was gently undulating and did not rise anywhere more than 600 feet above river level. The earth was hard and in places there was rock near the surface. Except for low scrub, thorn, cactus, sisal and in places what might have been the remains of a crop of cotton, the land was bare, like desert. Sandy paths led from village to village and the ground was criss-crossed with small water-courses or 'chaungs' which in February were dry. Only one of the chaungs that crossed our path was wide and that was at a place called Gyo which we did not reach for several days. The chaung at Gyo was as dry as the rest but about a quarter of a mile across and deep in sand. Farther on, as we drew near Kyaukse, the country became flatter and had more appearance of cultivation. In the neighbourhood of Kyaukse there were irrigation canals and one or two metalled roads.

In the first two days we crossed the range of low rocky hills; they were brownish yellow in colour, dry and stony. The highest point was a triangulation mark, 486 ft which acquired a momentary importance in our lives because it had to be 'taken', although there was no one

actually there to take it from. Patrols and stray villagers from time to time reported large numbers of Japanese in front of us, and we called down on them concentrations of artillery and mortar fire. An air strike by Hurribombers of the RAF was asked for on the first day and Sgt May drew my attention to the dozens of vultures which afterwards circled overhead. 'Fresh meat tonight,' he said dryly; he believed that the vultures knew from experience what an airstrike meant for them.

During those days I lived alone with my own group - the MI room staff. We slept and ate together, and were our own only companions, our only intimates. The adjutant gave us each night an area for ourselves and there we dug slit trenches as a precaution against night attack. As a rule one trench was for two men and I usually shared a trench with my batman. I kept my bedding and such odds and ends of kit as First Aid haversack, rifle, tin hat, washing and shaving gear and eating utensils above ground at the side of the trench; if there was a convenient tree we hung the chagals or canvas water-bottles from it to cool the water; if there was no tree we hung the chagals on the front of a jeep. I normally slept rolled in a blanket at the side of the trench and we did without mosquito nets because they got in the way if one had to jump into the trench. Some belongings which I did not want to lose, like books and a chess set that often entertained us (I had bought it for five rupees when I was in Calcutta), I kept in an ammunition box that was stored on my jeep. The area given us when the Battalion stopped for the night was usually near Battalion HQ; at the end of each day I could be found there by anyone who wished to report sick. Apart from battle casualties, with which I dealt as they happened, there were always a few men with fever, diarrhoea, sore feet and vague complaints which might or might not be serious. These last, and the overall picture of how many were going sick for trivial reasons, needed my constant and careful attention. The only officers of whom I saw much at that time were the CO and the adjutant, Captain Holwill. He was a young, dark, sturdy fellow of about my size, with a small black moustache. He was usually quiet of speech and I thought him 'a good bloke'; I took a liking to him; he knew his job and always did what he promised.

On the night of 7th March we met as usual at Battalion HQ for the evening 'Order Group' and heard the latest 'Sitrep' - Situation Report

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

- information about Japanese in villages around us. Next day the battalion was to take the village of Kanma, four miles farther east, with the help of tanks which were expected from a place called Magyi, a village to the north of us. The day started with an air strike and more vultures; then there was a long wait for the tanks to appear. We marched over a rocky, stony ridge through thorn-scrub and cactus until we were about a mile short of Kanma. Here a message came back to say that Kanma was more strongly defended than expected. I set up my RAP and we started digging in case we should be surprised and shelled. Digging in the heat of the afternoon was a desperate business; in the stony ground it was difficult to get down more than a few inches and we worried all night about not having proper cover from shells and mortar bombs. Cpl Stoffles wearing his Gurkha hat with the gay peacock feather appeared with the water cart at tea time and was very welcome. We poured the water into galvanised iron pakhals that fitted in a jeep or on the back of a mule. A pakhal held about five gallons and was convenient for filling the water-bottles and mugs of the thirsty men. The days in early March were beginning to be hot and on one of them I made a note, '85 degrees in shade at noon.' We started giving out salt tablets as a routine for the men to put in their water-bottles; the more impetuous swallowed them two at a time and were promptly sick.

In the end it was a battalion of Gurkhas that took Kanma and we did not enter the village until at first light the next day, the 9th March. We then had to wait while companies cleared villages on each side of our track onwards to Gyo. During the wait a Jap prisoner was brought in, the first any of us had seen; he was not wounded but he looked very thin and pale; his hands were tied behind his back and a BOR with fixed bayonet walked just behind him. Not long afterwards a Burman from the village climbed a toddy palm to change the gourds in which they collect sap; the juice seeps from cuts made in the stalks of the fronds at the top of the tree. It was a curious statement of everyday village life going on in spite of us. When at last we moved on I came across a badly wounded Jap in the open; he had a compound fracture of the thigh. We put him on a stretcher and carried it back past some of our men. They were waiting to go forward and we ran the gauntlet of an unending refrain which infuriated me. 'Bring the bugger here, Sir. We know what to do with him.' The Jap was so very

ill that I was provoked to go to them and tell them to ‘fucking well shut up and you’re damned lucky not to be on stretchers yourselves’, and a lot more for which afterwards I was sorry. My reaction was reflex, mechanical, the doctor looking after his patient, whoever he might be. I several times afterwards heard joking threats to prisoners not very seriously injured. I took no notice except to see that treatment was not skimped. Before I left the Devons wounded Japs were being brought in on stretchers and given cups of tea because they were now the underdogs. After dealing with the first Jap I made a rather bitter note on a scrap of paper that served me as a diary ‘It’s the difference between the professional and the amateur.’ Later in the day I took two jeeps to pick up some casualties in open country to the south of the track to Gyo, and in a dip of the ground came across a Japanese 105 mm gun in a sunken lane. I stopped the jeep and went on foot with one of my stretcher bearers to have a close look; we had an absurd temptation to hook it to the back of the jeep and tow it into camp. ‘Look, even the Doc’s section’s brought in a Jap gun!’ Then the stretcher bearer muttered that it might be booby-trapped and I realised that we were behaving like children - our job was to pick up the wounded men half a mile away; I sent someone back to report our find and the rest of us went on. We stopped that night about a mile short of Gyo and dug our slit trenches in very hard ground.

The Devons took Gyo on the 10th March. Two companies moved off at 0400 and crossed the wide chaung to the west of the village to make flanking attacks but were held up at first light by machine-gun fire. At 0845 a third company with tanks attacked the village directly and by 0915 HQ Company had advanced to the west bank of the chaung. By noon Gyo was clear of Japs. We crossed the chaung near one of our tanks which had been hit and was still burning, and entered the village along a sandy lane that was about six feet below the general level of the surrounding land; I set up the RAP there to take in casualties from the battle that was going on beyond Gyo. As my jeeps came over a low rise near the burning tank a 105mm shell landed behind them. More shells followed and soon they were landing about one every fifteen seconds all over the place. The area about the village and up the lane was stiff with trucks and men. Where the lane was deepest I made some fellows move their jeeps to make room for mine so that the RAP could be in the most sheltered place. While I was

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

doing this one shell landed in the sand, smack next to my own jeep, destroying my pack and its contents, which happened that day to include the precious chess set. Strangely, no one was hurt and the jeeps were not put out of action though two of them afterwards looked like pepper pots. We parked them up against a sandy bank where they were pretty safe.

The RAP staff had all been too near the last shell to be happy, so I dosed them with small amounts of brandy and then did the same for some members of HQ staff who looked as if they needed the treatment. Patients do not care to be attended by doctors who smell of drink, but apart from that, and the fact that it would not have looked well for me to be seen tipping, curiosity about myself forced on me at such a time a self-denying ordinance where drink was concerned. Several more shells came over but nothing else at the RAP was damaged. It was the first time I had been shelled in the open and it was most unpleasant.

Soon we began to deal with casualties from the battle half a mile ahead of us. I was at Gyo until the evening, by which time we had packed all the wounded off to the rear. We made a brew of tea and then followed the main body to a village called Ywatha about three miles farther on.

I arrived there in a jeep driven by Din (Dinwiddie Smith, of the AFS); we came over a low rise and saw on our right, on slightly raised ground, some of our men in slit trenches; others lay in firing positions on an open slope before them. To our left were clumps of trees and a row of palms. Machine guns and rifles were firing. I stopped the jeep on hearing that one of our men had been hit by a sniper. I could see the man on the open ground before us and I heard a shout, 'They've got him.' I took the words to mean that someone had got the sniper. I was in that sort of careless exhilarated state that sometimes came over me after a day when I was keyed-up, and without thinking I said to Din 'Right. We'll pick him up.' Din drove on without hesitation and with help from two men who appeared from nowhere we carried the casualty up a slope. We put down the stretcher behind a low bank while the men kept on firing at the trees with Brens. When I examined the 'casualty' I found that he had not a scratch on him; when someone had fired from the trees he had been so surprised that he had simply

dropped on the ground paralysed with fright. He was quite incoherent and instead of giving him a piece of my mind as I felt inclined I gave him a big dose of morphia to keep him quiet; next day he was perfectly all right.

Before digging in that night we counted 34 Japanese dead. We were on a low hill a little short of Natthadaw, surrounded as usual by a perimeter of wire, slit trenches, and men on guard with Brens firing on fixed lines along the edges of the perimeter. At dusk we stood to in the usual way and ranged our mortars about the perimeter in case of attack in the dark. Small bush fires were started by the mortar bombs and lit up the drifting white smoke and the silhouettes of toddy palms against the night sky. As soon as it was dark our area was mortared and shelled for a short time by the enemy but except for one burst of Bren gun fire the night was otherwise quiet. Patrols went out in the small hours and on returning before dawn reported many Japs at Gwekon and Tanaungain and in the country between. About midnight, soon after the burst from the Bren gun, I was roused to attend to one of the men. We had a general rule that no one ever went outside the perimeter in the dark, except for patrols whose times of going out and coming back were known to the sentries. This man, wanting to relieve himself, had carelessly wandered out into a Bren gun's fixed line of fire. He was badly cut about and was lucky to be alive. I patched him up and sent him back to the Field Ambulance in the morning.

A young and agreeable man, Capt Spread, joined the Battalion at Ywatha and took Holwill's place as adjutant. It was the 11th March, and the Frontier Force Regiment passed through our area and for the next week took the lead in the advance. They ran into Japanese opposition half a mile farther on. We at Ywatha were subjected to sniping and several men in the camp perimeter were wounded; after first aid treatment they were sent back as soon as the track was reported clear. The battalion was then ordered to put a road-block at Gyo, now behind us, and the company that went back to do this reported a concentration of 300 Japanese north of Taungledaw, a village three miles south-west of us.

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MANDALAY AND BEYOND

In that sort of war there was no such thing as a stable 'front', as it was understood in static warfare. We were advancing from west to east, moving so many miles each day and taking village after village but leaving on either side of us villages which might sometimes be occupied by Japanese. Each night we leaguered in a village or camped in the open, and were ready to be attacked from any direction. The track behind us was often shelled or attacked by Japanese. We sent patrols to villages on either side of the road, and often found that they had to be cleared of the enemy, sometimes for a second or third time. There was no question of drawing a line from north to south and saying that we were on the west of it and the Japs on the east. It was more as if one were to draw a line from west to east and say that at the west end of the line we were in the majority, though there might be a few scattered Japs, whereas at the other end of the line the Japs were in the majority; we advanced towards them along the line of perhaps a single road. To the west at first there were more of us and fewer of them, to the east more of them and fewer of us.

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For the infantryman not in battle one day is very like another. His march starts early in the cool before sunrise; he swings along at the side of the dry dusty track; on his head is a bush hat, over his shoulder his tin hat and a rifle or Sten gun and on his back a cluster of odds and ends, usually including a 'brew can', a blackened old tin with a wire handle.

In front of him, through dust clouds raised by passing jeeps or perhaps guns, he sees a shambling figure which is a replica of himself. At the side of the track are dust-covered trees, dry sandy ditches and the litter of a retreating army. Scattered about the rocks and fields are the stiff corpses of men and animals, swollen and discoloured. His sweaty tramp is relieved by ten-minute halts, sallies of grim wit and, very occasionally, pleasing encounters with villagers. When he meets Gurkha or Indian soldiers the British Tommy says

'Thick hai, Johnny?' which means 'How's tricks?' and the Gurkha, for he often is a Gurkha, says 'OK Johnny' with a broad grin and a little sideways twitch of his head. At last, usually before noon, he reaches a clump of palms or a village, throws off his pack and sets

about 'brewing up'. Someone shouts 'Chae's up!' and he pours hot, sweet, milky tea into his dried-up gullet, sore and stiff with dust and heat. Out come picks and shovels and the digging of trenches and fox-holes begins.

What he thinks of is always home - green, cool, full of love, womankind, food and beer - his idealised England. And yet, though most seem to have those dreams, they speak cynically about politics and are too disillusioned to think that their dreams will really come true. The dreams represent what they would like, not what they expect.

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My routine varied from day to day: a daily sick parade of some kind, a bit of administration and the treatment and evacuation of casualties when we were in action. My kit was the clothes I stood up in, some odds and ends like compass, maps, a few books, shaving kit, rifle, tin hat and water-bottle, plate, mug and spoon, blanket and ground sheet, and so-called 'jungle' boots rather like basket-ball boots. I became greedy during the day for shade, whether a tree or a bit of canvas, and spent my nights sleeping under the stars, close to a slit trench or bunker. It was a kind of life that I found supremely satisfying. I was learning about myself and the job. I found that in tight places I could think fairly calmly and that others would do as I told them. I hated telling them to go where it would frighten me to go, but they had their job and I had mine; often I evaded the problem by going with them. I found that I could work and walk all day in the hot sun and do my share of the digging for a couple of hours in the evening. I slept well when I could sleep at all. I was learning also what the ADMS had meant when he talked to me about the job. I felt that to do it well would need a better man than me. Dealing with battle casualties was only a small part of the work. The part I liked least was a kind of sorting - into those that I thought could stand a bit more and those that could not. Lord Moran wrote in a book about a very different war that 'the wounds we dress are as nothing' compared with the hurts to the mind.

But there were compensations too. One evening after a day of fighting which had still not died down a soldier came to me for some

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

small attention. He was not a strong man - he was in a way one of my 'problem children' - often coming with vague and trifling complaints which made me suspect that he was trying to 'work his ticket'. That night he was a very different man. He was happy, eager and a bit talkative. His eyes were bright; he was like a man who has found a treasure. He had found that he was worth something. He had, so he told me, himself killed three Japs - 'One over there Sir, one there, and one there. What happened was' and so on. The Japs may have been half starved but the point was that the fight had exalted him. He seemed innocent. A week later he was himself again but I never forgot that glory of his that recalled Julian Grenfell's poem.

'And when the burning moment breaks
And all things else are out of mind
And only joy of battle takes
Him by the throat and makes him blind.'

As an RMO I was lucky enough in those days to have work that had meaning; the life was exciting and my companions good. Until we can look back we rarely know enough to say 'This, now, is fulfilment'; but I think I must have been very happy then in a grim fashion. I realised afterwards that my attention was often directed more to those not wounded than to the wounded. The wounded were leaving the scene and for them I could do no more. My services to them had been importantly for the sake of those who were still in the fight, and it was to those in the fight that my attention must be directed.

*

On 14th March we were at Chaungwa in company with a battery of guns and on that day 30 BOR reinforcements joined the battalion. In the small hours of the next morning one of our patrols starting out in the dark was shot up by our own sentries: one BOR was killed and two wounded. It was the kind of misadventure, due to failure to pass information, that had a very bad effect on morale. We passed Dwehla next day and reached Ngazu where there was a bridge over the Panlaung river. The bridge had been damaged and needed repair before tanks could cross. The Frontier Force were dug in on the far

side of the bridge, and next day were expected to go on to capture a road junction at Nyaungwe, three miles farther. There the Devons were to take over from the FFR and to advance to Kyaukse, another four miles.

My RAP at Ngazu was by a small pagoda. When I arrived two wounded Burmese were brought to me on stretchers, a man and a young girl, both with broken limbs; they were victims of shelling. The camp perimeter was not many yards away and drawn up near me was a troop of tanks. Their heavy machine guns pointed over the wire and along the road, a deadly threat to anyone approaching from the east. I had been warned that fighting patrols had gone out to villages north of the road and would be returning before dawn but the tank crews did not seem to know; the 'fog of war' was not confined to great battles and offensives - it crept with its doubts and uncertainties into the littlest skirmish.

On 17th March we reached the road junction at Nyaungwe and moved into the Frontier Force Regiment's positions. From Natthadaw we had come 25 or 30 miles. Next day patrols were to clear the road north and others were to occupy the village of Ngedo (See map), which was wrongly supposed to be empty; without tanks in support an attack was not pressed.

We were at Nyaungwe for five nights and on the first day we made contact with 32 Brigade which was to the north of us. I had a chance to chat with the MO of the Northamptonshire Regiment. He was a small, phlegmatic, determined individual who told me how he dealt with men who complained about their feet. 'I sit down by the roadside, take off my boots and socks and say to each one "If your feet are worse than mine I'll do something about it, but if not, you can get on with your job".'

Colonel Jones and the adjutant visited 80 Brigade HQ at Dwehla and came back with a new 2 i/c a tall, capable-looking man, Major Freeman Mitford; they brought orders for our next moves. The first village on the Kyaukse road, Puttaing, was partly occupied by the enemy, and there were Japs dug in by the road itself and in villages on either side: Pahtodaing, Zegon and Thinbok (See map). On the 20th an attack was mounted against Puttaing after an artillery bombardment

but the attack was called off in the absence of tanks and in the face of medium and light machine gun fire. That night the enemy fired thirty rounds of 75 mm shell into the area of battalion HQ I had a sizeable RAP at Nyaungwe. We roofed it with baulks of timber covered with a good deal of earth so that casualties had protection from the nightly shelling. We were jittered throughout the night of the 20th and another thirty rounds of 75 mm shell fell inside our perimeter.

The 21st was a bad day. Large numbers of men were reporting sick all day and cholera was suspected in the area; as well as dealing with men going sick I paid a quick visit by jeep to the ADS near Brigade at Dwehla to get cholera vaccine with which during the day I injected all those in the battalion whose cholera immunisation was due. The numbers reporting sick continued high all evening and at seven that night one of the men shot himself in the hand. I had seen too many self-inflicted wounds, usually in the foot. What could you do about them? I dressed them, and they might have been accidents. But rifles and revolvers do not go off by themselves (unlike Sten guns, perhaps) and the position of the wounds in the hand or foot and the man's attitude to it, a mixture of fright and satisfaction, made me suspicious. I wrote them down as accidents, not as self-inflicted wounds, and I took care not to publicise them. The man's companions always knew what had happened. They always knew the man concerned. They were slightly contemptuous but not censorious. I never noticed that a self-inflicted wound had a bad effect on others - they were only sorry that a man had been brought to do this to himself. My attitude was that the sooner these men were out of the battalion the better.

One of the draft that joined at Chaungwa was a youngster who had not long come from Somerset. He was by me one night at evening stand-to and talked to me about his home. His way of speaking reminded of the Devon men in the Anti-tank Regiment,

‘Where’m you to, Zurr? (Where do you come from?)

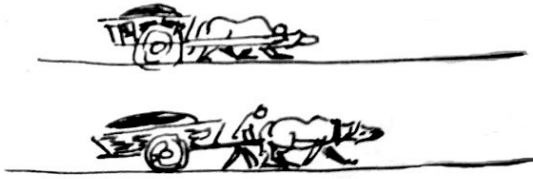
“Pick ’ee oop”, E zed to Oi’ After a while I suggested that he might like to have a talk with the Padre about his problems and heard him mutter to himself, after a little thought, ‘Ee, Oi caan’t stoomach ‘ee.’

Neither could I, as a matter of fact; he struck me as 'wet and pi' as the saying was. I was not feeling very good myself that night. I had no thermometer because the breast pocket of my tunic was so hot in the middle of the day that the mercury repeatedly burst the glass. After breaking several thermometers I gave up carrying one and I now got Sgt May to take my temperature - 101 degrees. My left hand was swollen because of a septic sore and I was bothered by the diarrhoea and nausea from which we all suffered in small doses from time to time. These ailments were no more than those for which I treated others all day.

At midnight jittering began. There were brief attacks on our perimeter, shouting, the use of dischargers which lobbed grenades into the battalion area, and a good deal of fire from an 81 mm mortar. In the morning we found that the Japs had left nine dead bodies and one wounded man on our wire. I was up intermittently all through the night as casualties were brought in. Just before midnight thirty more rounds of 75 mm shell were fired into the battalion area but these produced no casualties. Our casualties seemed to be mainly from grenades and rifle fire, and sometimes from our own mortar shells falling short.

Lieutenant Watts, a very good officer who had been a long time with the battalion, was brought to me that night. The front part of his head had been blown away by a mortar bomb and he was in a bad way. I had him put into the bunker and after dressing his wound I sat by him for a while listening to his breathing. In two hours he died. I felt the more bitter from believing that it was one of our own mortars that had killed him.

At dawn the sporadic attacks and the sniping were still going on. Behind us the road to Dwehla was being shelled and was too dangerous from sniper fire for me to send casualties back.



Chapter 17 The Devons (2), Kyaukse (See map)

From our position astride the road junction by the canal at Nyaungwe I could see Kyaukse four miles away. The town was at most about two miles long from north to south and a mile wide from east to west, but it was bigger than any town we had yet seen in Burma. Kyaukse was important because it was on the road and rail routes between Mandalay and Meiktila; it was a main Japanese supply depot and a link with their armies in the south; the Japs meant to hold it as long as they could.

As I looked from Nyaungwe the country before me was absolutely flat to beyond Kyaukse where a hill dotted with small white pagodas rose abruptly to over 800 feet, the near end of a rocky spur of a range of hills visible in the distance. I could see very little of Kyaukse itself for it was screened by trees. On the plain before it were a surprising number of small villages marked by clumps of trees in which the white tops of pagodas showed. The road to Kyaukse ran in almost a straight line and was lightly metalled: the surface would bear motor traffic and even tanks. The 'hard' surface was not much wider than the width of one of our big trucks and on each side were the dusty earth tracks used by bullock carts; the paddy fields, at that season firm and hard, were at a slightly lower level.

As I looked along the road the Tamok canal was on my right or south side, and for a mile ran parallel with and not far from the road; then, at Zayat, among trees and a few pagodas, the canal turned north, passed under the road (Zayat bridge) and made a loop to the north that took it half a mile from the road before it turned south, crossed once more under the road (the 'second' bridge) and continued south to Myaung U. After that the canal ran south-east to Letpanbin, a village on the outskirts of Kyaukse. (See map)

The canal was very like an English canal - the sort of thing you might find in Shropshire - but shallower because it was intended for

irrigation, not navigation. The road bridges across it were simple arches, generally made of brick, and because the canal was below road level they were not hump-backed. The distance from Nyaungwe to Zayat was a mile and from Zayat to the next bridge, the 'second' bridge, another mile, the general direction of the road being a little south of east. From the 'second' bridge south along the canal to Myaung U was rather less than a mile, and from Myaung U eastward, again along the canal, to Letpanbin was also a little less than a mile.

When the CO and adjutant came back from the 80 Brigade conference at Dwehla on the 21st March we met for a final Order Group. The CO explained that tomorrow the battalion would take Zayat and go on to capture the 'second bridge'. After taking the bridge we would dig in on the east side of the canal. There would be air support and support from tanks and artillery.

It was a bad night, with shelling and repeated attacks on our perimeter, and in the morning I wrote in a notebook,

'22nd March. 0830. All hell began ahead - planes, tanks, artillery. Dealt with a number of wounded, and realised that as the road behind was being shelled and also was subject to small arms fire from both sides, I could not at once send the casualties back to the ADS at Dwehla. About noon I took a trip forward to see what was going on.'

At 0830 'D' Company had attacked, with a troop of tanks in support, and soon afterwards had taken Zayat bridge. The Japs had blown the bridge and Bailey bridging was sent for so that the tanks could cross the canal. The morning's action brought fire from Thinbok village and at 1030 'A' Company with tanks attacked and cleared the two villages Thinbok and Zegon. Meanwhile the enemy began to shell the area of Zayat bridge.

At 1330 'C' Company moved forward through Zayat and went on to take the next ('second') bridge; by 1430 they had taken it and orders came for the battalion to consolidate at the 'second' bridge and on the east side of the canal.

At 1500 I collected my section and moved up; we passed through Zayat and went across the open stretch to the 'second' bridge. Above the general noise of battle we could hear the loud crack of bullets as

they passed, and Sgt May's jeep was hit, but without serious damage. When I crossed the 'second' bridge I found that to the left of the road on the far side of the canal there was a dyke a few feet high which ran parallel to the canal. The dyke was several yards from the canal bank and I chose a hollow between the canal bank and the dyke as the place for my RAP for the next bit of action as the battalion closed in on Kyaukse. We began digging.

The battalion was now concentrating near the bridge and the enemy fired six rounds of HE into the area. When I looked back along the road I saw a jeep get a direct hit and go up in flames. I jumped into my jeep and, thoroughly frightened, started out for the scene; half-way there someone stopped me and said that miraculously no one had been hurt. Thank God! I was thankful and at the same time for some reason felt slightly deflated, perhaps after having screwed myself up. I returned to the RAP where Sgt May already had everything organised. Seven Japanese bodies and various bits of equipment were lying about the area and soon we were dealing with our wounded, dosing them with drugs, attending to their injuries and seeing them comfortably on stretchers until it was safe for a jeep ambulance to take them back to Dwehla. In the meantime some Japanese opened up with a 'Battalion gun' from a position north of us, among trees by the canal.

Half an hour after I returned to the RAP two Anti-tank Quads towing guns and carrying ammunition received direct hits near the place where the jeep had been hit half an hour earlier, just south of the road and half-way between the Zayat and 'second' bridges. An agitated Troop Commander stood before me. He wore a green slouch hat, his open-necked green battle-dress blouse was untidy and his trousers above brown leather boots hardly came down to his ankles. He had popping eyes and a sort of wispy moustache. He looked a mess, distraught, clutching his empty tobacco pipe. His Quads, the means of using his guns, were being destroyed and the two guns lay useless in the paddy. His Troop was finished. 'Ten men wounded,' he said 'and four dead. Can't you do something.'

I took two jeep-ambulances to 200 yards short of the burning Quads and went on foot to see if there was anything I could do. On the road were two Lee tanks, their guns banging off at intervals with a deafening noise. They were shooting at something in the woods north

of us, perhaps the 'Battalion gun'. Standing by one of them I looked up and spoke to the Tank Commander; he was in his turret and said that he had been searching with glasses and could see nothing moving by the Quads, no wounded; the Quads by now were a blazing mass, the ammunition they carried banging away all over the place. The Troop Commander came up to me and asked me to go on with him to the Quads and call on my jeeps. I refused either to accompany him or to send my men. Words which I have now forgotten but which greatly angered me passed between us and he walked off to the blazing trucks alone. A jeep with two Anti-tank gunners came up to me and I recognised Dolbear from Bill Haden's battery; he was one of my stretcher bearers at Satpangon and I told him to take his jeep, at a safe distance from the exploding ammunition, to make sure that there was no one lying out wounded in the paddy field beyond the trucks. Later I found that in the first Quad that was hit three gunners sitting on the bench behind the driver had been killed outright by one armour-piercing shell - solid shot. No one else had been seriously hurt.

I walked back to my own jeeps and we returned to the RAP. Shells were falling near 'second' bridge and I was in time to deal with four casualties as they were carried in. One was a Company Commander, Major Douglass; he had been very badly injured and lost the greater part of one hip. He was not properly conscious as he was carried off the road into the RAP and I saw that he could not last long. We dressed the wounds as best we could and a Corporal called Sergeant and another jeep ambulance driver were able later to get the wounded back through Zayat to the ADS without incident.

That night I talked about Douglass to Capt Holroyd who was now in charge of the Company. Douglass was a man I had much admired and had thought one of the best of the Devon's remaining officers. Holroyd, a steady sort of man, told me how Douglass had shouted "Stretcher-bearers!"

'in that awful way they do after a shell has dropped'.

One of the other companies was short of stretcher bearers and after we had eaten in the evening I told three of my men to report to that company. They were good men, but they had had a heavy day and

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

before they would go I had to speak to them more sharply than was usual for me. Their names were Young, Herford and Scully.

In the evening Bill Haden drove up to the RAP and walked across to tell me what had really happened to the Anti-tank Quad and its gun crew that afternoon.

During the early part of the night Sgt May and I shared a hole we had dug in the west side of the low dyke that ran parallel to the canal. We crouched side by side, pressing back at intervals into the earth burrow for shelter, and he told me about his London background. After a while he dug his paybook out of his breast pocket and took out a folded letter to show me. It was from his mother: 'Dear Stan, can you send me a snap of you outside your bungalow.' We were able to laugh and then get some sleep. At two in the morning the enemy began a series of attacks on our perimeter, keeping up a steady bombardment of the battalion area with grenades from discharger cups. They kept it up until after five in the morning when they made their last attack and withdrew leaving one body on our wire and a trail of blood going towards a nearby village. During the night defensive fire from our own mortars had killed one of our men and wounded several more. Seven men were carried into the RAP; one died there three hours later and the others I recorded as 'fair to middling', but one of these died later at the Field Ambulance.

Patrols reported that during the night Japs had come back to occupy four bunkers on the south side of the road between us and Zayat and had also come back to re-occupy the copse north of the Tamok canal and not far from us; it was there that they had the nasty little piece of artillery known as a 'Battalion gun' which was much hated. In the morning I had for a time to keep all the wounded at the RAP because the road was no longer safe for ambulances; however, I was able to send them off at about one in the afternoon.

At 1430 a 75 mm gun began to shell the battalion area very accurately. A few minutes earlier there had been a shout of 'Karner's up' from the cookhouse. One of my stretcher-bearers had picked up his mess tin and was about to step on the road when he heard the sound of the first approaching shell. I heard him mutter 'O fuck the karner' as he dived into the nearest slit trench.

Spread, the adjutant, and his batman were both hit about 20 yards away on the Kyaukse side of the bridge, where they had begun to dig a slit trench at the side of the road. Jock Heaney, one of the best of my stretcher-bearers ran forward with me to see if we could do anything for them. The batman had multiple injuries of which the most in need of attention was an artery in his upper arm that was spouting blood. It was easy to stop that, and Jock Heaney with another stretcher-bearer who had now emerged from the RAP carried the batman back while I went to look at Spread, crouched on his side, poor little devil, in the hole he had only just begun to dig. Fortunately, though he was not yet dead, he was unconscious. He was gasping for breath at long intervals in a way which for some reason made me think of a sobbing child. As I tried to assess the extent of his injuries - he had taken the full force of the explosion - I heard more shells coming and without knowing what I was doing found myself face down in a puddle of water, my face in the mud at the side of the road, so quick were my reflexes by now. Then Jock Heaney was back with a stretcher and between us we carried Spread to the RAP.

Jock Heaney was a specially good bloke who, like Sgt May, was one of my chief helpers in the RAP. He was a medium-sized, black-haired Glaswegian aged 27, a widower with a little girl, a Roman Catholic, quick-witted and slightly slow of speech. He had lived a lot in England and spoke more like a country Scot than a Glaswegian. He was well built, handy with a spade, and friendly. He had only recently volunteered as a stretcher-bearer. Before that he was a fighting soldier. He came back one day from fetching in a casualty with the American, Din Smith; Jock was scornful of the men of the company whose casualty it was - 'They wouldn't budge from their holes' he said, 'not even to fetch in one of their own.' At five in the afternoon I was brought a message to say that three of my stretcher-bearers who were with one of the companies had been killed by a shell that morning: Young, Herford, Scully. I went to investigate and to check the names: it was true, and those were they. They were killed outright. 'A direct hit,' I was told, 'probably a 25-pounder.' The stretcher-bearers, whether at HQ or out with the companies, knew each other and were a close, friendly group. Young, Herford and Scully usually went about together and they had two particular friends at the RAP, Macey and Stevens. The two were so broken by the news that I knew

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

that for a while I could make no use of them. 'Why can't they stop?' cried Stevens, 'God! Why can't they stop?' I hardly knew the three dead men but coming on top of the events of the last few days their deaths shook me too. Stoffles, the usually cheerful water corporal with the peacock feather in his hat, sat on the ground with his head in his hands, saying 'I can't stop thinking about them. I can't stop thinking about them.' I kept thinking of Spread as I had found him, crouched where he had been digging, his breath coming in little gasps that sounded like sobs. None of us wanted food that night. They were days after which we needed comforting, but all my mind would do was to go over events and wonder if I had shirked anything.

The third night at the 'second' bridge I noted as 'a quiet night', but Japs were prowling round the perimeter. There was small arms fire on and off all night and before dawn a wounded Jap was found abandoned by his companions - an unusual event. He was taken prisoner.

Patrols that had been out during the night reported Japs at the two villages Myaung U and Magyidan, one each side of the canal, less than a mile south of us; at mid-day a patrol on the east bank of the canal reported both villages clear and the battalion was ordered to move at once into the Myaung U - Magyidan area. I packed up the RAP at 'second' bridge and began to move my section down the west bank of the canal to set up an RAP at Myaung U. I had just been told 'No medical arrangements called for - the area is now unoccupied', when there were urgent shouts from the direction of Myaung U for 'Ambulances - Stretcher-bearers!' As usual, I thought.

Japanese with medium and light machine guns were still stubbornly occupying bunkers in the east part of Magyidan and as I moved down I began to meet casualties. On the canal bank short of Myaung U was a jeep ambulance on which lay our new Second in Command who had joined the battalion a few days earlier. Major Mitford had a bullet through his neck and when I looked I found that the stretcher-bearer who had picked him up and put him on the ambulance had done as good a first aid job for him as anyone could. He was lucky and later made a good recovery. I set up the RAP near a pagoda on the canal bank at Myaung U as more casualties came in, and here news came that I had lost one more stretcher-bearer.

Lewis, a young man whose home at Dolgellau in North Wales was not far from my own, had gone into the open near Magyidan to bring in a casualty. He knelt to put a field dressing on the wound, and then lifted the man on his back. When he stood to start the carry he was himself shot and killed. The wounded man rolled to the ground and lay for some time in a hollow before crawling to safety. It was only a few days since Lewis and I had sat for half an hour together, talking in Welsh about scenes familiar and dear to us both.

Digging that evening beside the canal we found that we could not dig deep because canal water began to seep into the bottom of the trench. I moved the RAP in among a small cluster of pagodas enclosed by a low white wall. A drink ration was issued; mine was a quart bottle of warm American beer. There were tamarind trees by the canal at Myaung U and when the evening breeze stirred the leaves it stirred also the tiny temple bells; they gave out a sweet tinkling as they must have done for hundreds of years.

The day that followed began with heavy shelling of the 'second' bridge where we had been for the last three days and nights. The Frontier Force Regiment had moved in there and I heard that one shell fell exactly in the middle of where the RAP had been; perhaps it had not been a good idea to have put it so near an obvious target like a bridge.

We at Myaung U were shelled in the afternoon and evening by 75 mm and 150 mm guns with surprisingly little effect, but our forward platoons suffered greatly from small arms and machine gun fire. They were now up against the last line of the Japanese defences of Kyaukse. The enemy was well dug in before the villages of Mezebin and Letpanbin. I was able to treat and send back by ambulance a number of seriously wounded men, but was much more worried by the very large number that came back to the RAP suffering from nothing more than 'nerves': most of these, after I had listened to them and sometimes given a placebo, I sent back to their duty. Among them was one of my stretcher-bearers who had been carried back sobbing and had had to be soothed and then returned to the company from which he had come. Another stretcher-bearer had run away during the night and could not be found. Among the wounded was an Indian soldier who had had a bullet through his head from side to side and,

contrary to the popular belief that a bullet through the head is fatal, was surprisingly full of life. The demoralisation of the many unwounded who went sick was a bad sign, but not all the unwounded who came my way were demoralised. I wrote of one man 'The wretched Shippey (that was the man's name) came in tonight seeing his mate's face everywhere.' Shippey's mate had been shot but Shippey carried him from where he had been shot until he found that he was carrying a dead body. I sat with Shippey for a time and later, when he had settled down, he fumbled in his pockets and produced a pair of Japanese forceps he had picked up, saying 'I knew I had something I had to give the Doc.' Someone else brought me a beautiful, small, compact case of Japanese surgical instruments which he had picked up at a position his company had overrun. Other trophies from positions that were overrun were art nouveau - contemporary drawings in black and white of 'comfort girls', anatomical details imaginatively picked out in scarlet. These specimens were only on show to us, and were not given away by their owners.

Plans were laid to make a final attack on the Japanese positions on the 27th March, the attack to be supported by air attack and tanks. At mid-morning there was heavy bombing of the Japanese positions but the attack made no headway: the supporting tanks got bogged down in a marsh, one of the attacking companies was pinned down by machine gun fire, and by late afternoon it was clear that no progress would be made without heavy casualties; 80 Brigade HQ called off the attack. Next day there was more heavy bombing of the Japanese positions by the RAF: Thunderbolts bombed and strafed them in the early afternoon and Hurribombers repeated the attacks later; the Japanese were still there in the evening after an artillery concentration had been brought down, and the Devons made no headway.

An exception to the low spirits of the men was to be found in an old regular Warrant Officer, Sergeant-Major Streak who after a few drinks exposed himself recklessly to enemy fire in a brave attempt to take a position on the canal bank half a mile east of Mezebin Village. There may have been many individuals like him but the battalion was now in no condition to do more than send out offensive patrols. The Japs still clung to their positions on the outskirts of Kyaukse; we were

visited by the CO and IO of the Northamptonshire Regiment and there was some talk of that battalion relieving the Devons. In the event the Japanese made the decisions for us on the day that our relief was being discussed.

The 9th/12th Frontier Force Regiment had by-passed Kyaukse on the north and taken the 800 ft high hill immediately overlooking the town. Japanese resistance ended and an evening patrol reported Letpanbin clear; at dawn next morning Mezebin too was clear. The enemy had melted away into the hills to the east of Kyaukse and except for abandoned stores there was nothing in the town.

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When I woke before dawn on the 30th March I was lying on my blanket on the brick floor at the side of a pagoda. I felt unaccountably low, sensing that a special time was at an end. It was odd how flat one felt after the action - half longing to be back in its unpleasantness and excitement. Din had pleased me one night when, frustrated, I had said that I sometimes wished I were a combatant officer, and he said 'Gee, you'd do that all right.'

I remembered lying there the night before, happy after the day's work, stretching tired limbs, and dreamily aware of the small pagoda in the corner of the low-walled enclosure. The moon rose and flooded the enclosure with light. I could hear the low voices of the signallers at their sets, and the familiar jargon. 'Star, is that Star? Crete line here. OK Sir, you're through to Star.'

The fleeting time of 'Stand-to' in the morning was beautiful; the sky was dove grey, the moon not set, and the great tamarind tree by the canal, its leaves turning colour, stirred in the wind like English trees in autumn. I was happier then. The cool fresh breeze that swayed the palms and made the temple bells tinkle blew away my spasm of morning gloom. I wished that in sketches I could do justice to the beauty of the countryside - centred round clumps of trees, and largely depending on artificial irrigation. My surroundings at Myaung U were lovely - a little village with a cool artificial waterway running through it, shady trees, grass almost like English grass, and palms, a well, a grove of banana plants and the pagodas by which I lived. It

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

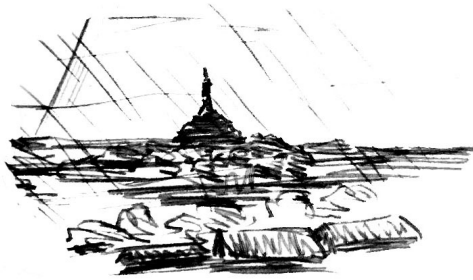
was Good Friday. I walked into Letpanbin and the Northants marched into Kyaukse.

I went to Evening Service on Easter Sunday; I did not quite know why. About one eighth of the battalion was there, sitting in a half circle around a clearing, a grove of palms on one side, the canal on the other. It was a hot sweaty evening and the sentiments expressed by the Padre and by the Rev. Custer Watson bored and embarrassed me - the acceptance of a benevolent deity. I wished at times that I too could accept such an absurdity and I was surprised at how many British soldiers, unreligious in their lives and in their thoughts of every day, were superstitious and credulous when it came to religion. Custer read, or quoted, 'Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death' with a distressing American accent and with painful attention to emotion. Only the final blessing carried conviction, whoever it might be addressed to.

'Be with us all, and with those whom we love.'

The next few days were better for the battalion. The men were having some rest and I had a chance to inoculate most of them against typhoid, tetanus and cholera, an outbreak of which was confirmed by the doctors at the Field Ambulance at Dwehla.

We turned the pagoda forecourt into an MI room. Sgt May and two helpers set up a trestle table and stationed me there with a fully loaded 10cc syringe of vaccines; the men were paraded by companies and filed by. Each man's paybook was inspected before he reached me to make sure that he was due for injection and another of my orderlies made a note of the fact after the injection was given. Someone kept me supplied with fully loaded syringes and I put a dose into each man's arm as he passed. The men were in a good mood, beginning to relax from the pressure and strain of the last weeks and as the companies filed by with their left arms bare, sleeves rolled up, I realised that they were quietly singing; the tune seemed familiar, 'Pistol Packing Momma', and gradually I made out the words, 'Lay that needle down, Doc, lay that needle down.'



Chapter 18 The Race for Rangoon'

At the beginning of April The Devons moved to Pyiban, a mile south of Kyaukse. The battalion, with other British infantry, was to be withdrawn to India and I expected to be posted to some other unit in the Division.

When not in action my men made a habit of sleeping on spare stretchers; I dare say they found them easier than the hard ground. On our first morning at Pyiban one of them complained when he got up that something under his stretcher was moving and making a rustling noise. A small crowd gathered to watch while two men suddenly turned the stretcher over and exposed a large snake. It was brown, thick-bodied, and 8-10 feet long - a 'Rat Snake', not poisonous. But the BOR, like the Indian soldier, looked on every snake as 'bad' and this one was quickly despatched with a blow from a heavy stick.

All of us had in our different ways been for weeks and months on 'The Road to Mandalay' even if it was never Kipling's 'road', and it was unthinkable, when there was nothing to stop me, that I should miss seeing the ancient capital. I took a jeep and with two BORs drove through Kyaukse and on for the thirty or so miles to Mandalay. I thoroughly enjoyed swift rides along Burmese roads. The windscreen of the jeep was down and the gusty wind of our movement was fresh and cool. There were tall shady trees on either side, a big lake in one place and lots of small white pagodas in wayside villages.

I had not thought it possible that Mandalay would be disappointing and would leave me bored but except for the thrill of expectation as we drove in past hundreds of pagodas the town was dull and in ruins. I would have exchanged it any day for an untouched Burmese village. Much of the Fort and the central part of the town

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

was destroyed, so we drove on to look at Mandalay Hill, the great rock which stands on the north side of the town. It was 700-800 feet high, covered with shrines and bearing the scars of battle. Up a long ridge on the south was a stairway that passed among the shrines to reach a pagoda on the very top. There must have been hundreds of steps and we toiled up them to be able to say that we had been to the top. The climb was hot and tedious.

On another day I drove past Mandalay and took the road into the hills to the east, to Maymyo. The approach, where the hills abut on the plains, was very attractive. We passed through rocky valleys to a plateau covered with bamboo which gave place higher up to a more English type of vegetation: deciduous trees, lawns. Maymyo was pleasant, and high enough to be cool at night; from it a mountain road went winding on for 140 miles to Lashio on the Chinese border.

Sometimes on slack days I went into the rocky hills east of Kyaukse with Din Smith. I had brought with me from home a light climbing rope in case one day I found a fellow climber and had a chance to use it. Among pagoda crowned rocky hills not far to the east of Kyaukse we found small cliffs on which we scrambled, keeping a lookout for snakes. I was sorry when Din was posted away.

From Pyiban I paid visits to the nearest Field Ambulance and on one of these visits I took the CO with me. He had been ill for some time and I had at last persuaded him to be properly examined and treated. I suspected that he had amoebic dysentery and at the Field Ambulance they decided that he should be sent back to India without delay.

About the end of the first week in April there was a change in the weather pattern and one morning, sleeping as usual in the open, I was soaked by a sharp little storm, with hailstones. Sgt May brought me fragments of ice an inch and a half across. The following night it rained heavily again. On my last evening with the battalion one of the sergeant-majors came to my tent and we sat on the ground with Sgt May, smoking black cheroots and sipping whisky while they recalled experiences at the evacuation of Dunkirk. Next morning (the 12th April) I got up in the dark at 0530 and was driven south through a rainstorm to rejoin my old friends of 111 Anti/Tank Regiment. They

gave me a lift in convoy to a place six miles south of Meiktila, where the sky at evening was ominous with heavy grey cloud; I slept under a canvas sheet hung from a mango tree, and the wind all night tapped the mango leaves against the canvas.

One of the 20th Division's Field Ambulances was not far away and I went there to ask about my next job. The CO asked if I should like to take over one of the Field Ambulance's companies, but I had no wish, if there was any choice, to return to a medical unit. The ADMS was with us and I turned to him to ask if I could not remain as an RMO, say in a Gurkha battalion. He said that he would have to use me in a British unit and that it would have to be the Gunners - 114 Field Regiment, RA. We had become friendly and when we were alone after a convivial evening of poker he went back briefly to business: 'Those Devons,' he said brusquely, 'you stopped the rot.' Remembering the last days before Kyaukse, I wondered if he was not overstating the case.

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XIVth Army was now moving south along two lines: 4 Corps down what was called the 'railway corridor' east of the Pegu Yomas; 33 Corps, to which 20th Indian Division belonged, down the Irrawaddy Valley to the west of the Pegu Yomas in the direction of Magwe and Prome. 20th Division was to intercept Japs retreating east across the Irrawaddy from South-West Burma and the Arakan.

I joined the gunners in time to take part in what Slim called 'The Race for Rangoon'. This stirring phrase did not refer to some neck and neck dash by competing elements of XIVth Army for the honour of being the first to capture Rangoon; it did not even refer to a race between our overland invasion of Burma and a possible seaborne invasion mounted from the Bay of Bengal. It was, more prosaically, a race with the monsoon, a race to seize the deep-water harbour of Rangoon before monsoon cloud and rain made the supply of an army overland and by air impossible.

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I caught up with 114 Field Regiment, RA at Natmauk, between Meiktila and Magwe. It was a place where there were large numbers

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

of captives - Japanese prisoners and surrendered 'Indian National Army' (for the most part Indian soldiers captured by the Japs earlier in the war and induced to change sides). They were herded together in a big compound in huts roofed with bamboo, an enclosure which had served as a hospital. The Japanese all had small peaked caps, their clothes were in tatters, and they were emaciated. They lay on the ground shivering with fever, and many of them suffered obviously from diarrhoea. They looked at us with empty eyes. Armed Gurkhas stood guard, though this was scarcely necessary because these men could hardly have walked a step.

My new CO was a tall raw-boned man with a bushy black moustache, a strong red nose and a shock of dark hair flecked with grey. He wore his cap tilted well forward over sunglasses and his hair at the back bulged under the rim of the cap and over his collar. He wore the ribbon of the DSO which he had been awarded in Italy. He greeted me with hopeful enthusiasm; 'Glad to see you, Doc. Play bridge?' One of a bridge four at Regimental Headquarters had been posted away or gone sick; I had to admit that I did not play bridge and his interest waned perceptibly; it always does when you have to confess that you do not play bridge. His name was Mackenzie.

I liked him. He was straight, with level eyes. He laughed pleasantly and his conversation was made up largely of 'I mean' and 'What!' words that did not sound at all fatuous on his lips. I imagined him to be a fairly typical good type of regular soldier, fair and sensible. He had wanted to be a doctor and was faintly incredulous at finding that in the life we were living I should have preferred to be a soldier. We talked one day about Europe and 'non-fraternization' and he said, 'It's hopeless with the British soldier if there are children about. I mean, look at 'em, Doc.' We were in a village and one of our trucks in convoy was halted on the road, a grey truck with the white American star painted on the bonnet, water-filled chagals strung up on each side of the windscreen. It was waiting to move as soon as the truck before it moved, and there were children all over it, responding to the driver's advances. In central Burma we had lots of the little beggars about - quiet, smiling and attractive, with brown faces, almond eyes, chubby bodies, jet-black hair. Mackenzie went on, 'The biggest trouble with non-fraternization is the difficulty of keeping it up

when British soldiers see children about.' He added, about Europe, 'You don't want to be bloody with them (the Germans), you want to be strict.' Of the German army he said 'No good whittling away at them - take away their uniforms, give 'em a blue suit and a kick up the what d'you call it; show 'em the door and say "Get out".'

He warned me against thinking of ever being a doctor in the Regular Army, and recalled a doctor whose carelessness, he thought, had led to the death of a brother officer's wife; the doctor's only concern before the funeral had been what to wear: 'Swords or no swords?'

That day's journey was on a straight, level road with a good surface. It followed an embankment with dusty rutted tracks for bullock carts at a slightly lower level on either side. Trees had been planted along its length. In the fields grew a tall reddish-brown crop that was clearly marked off in squares by the light green grass of 'bunds', the low turf walls about a foot high that separated the fields. The distant horizon was level as the sea's, broken only by the outline of woods where there were villages with their pagodas and sometimes a kyaung or monastery. The country was more richly wooded than in the parts of India that I had seen and at that season looked luxuriant and fresh. In the farthest distance was a range of blue hills. In places, at the side of the road, there were ditches full of water where groups of villagers hunted frogs with blowpipes. We drove on the left.

The gunners struck me as having a professional sort of technical polish of which I had not seen much since my days in hospitals at home, and I quickly became interested in them and their guns, the 25-pounders, one of the famous guns of the war. At first I disliked the guns; they made an infernal din when they were not, as they were for much of the time, standing idle; until I got used to it the sharp crack made me jump when I was out somewhere with a battery and they fired without warning in the middle of the night.

I found that I had taken the place of a Czech psychologist whom everyone treated as having been a bit of a joke, and I thought at first that I should have my hands full. I set the MI room staff to dig slit trenches while I had a long conversation with the bombardier in charge. I liked Bombardier Lawrence and knew we should get on. He

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

was 25 years old, very dark and slight, with a long face and good features. There was something fine drawn about him; he was intelligent and took a pride in his job. Jimmy Fields, my batman, was a short, sturdy, fair man of about 27; there was nothing fine drawn about him but he was a treasure, very good at odd jobs, thoroughly even-tempered, full of fun and backchat; a good scout. The third man was a thin quiet fellow who did not say much. I had a 15-cwt Dodge truck and a driver called Schlaepfer; the other medical staff were on the strength of the various batteries. Jimmy Fields had a way with Indian soldiers. He talked vigorously at them in what, as far as he was concerned, was as good as their own language - a string of Urdu words spoken quickly and decisively with much grinning and gesticulation. The words were chosen absolutely at random and made no sense - he did not as a rule know what they meant, but the Indian soldiers loved it.

‘Kis Mukkan?’ was a phrase he used as a greeting, without much idea of what the words meant. ‘Kis’ meant, near enough, ‘What?’ and ‘Mukkan’ ‘Butter’- ‘Kis Mukkan?’ he would say, as you might say ‘What cheer?’

The people I most liked and found genuine and interesting in that unit were the Other Ranks. Whenever I could I ate with them. They were the middle class or lower middle class ordinary folk - commonplace perhaps in their tastes and thoughts - but sincere and often intelligent. There was no pretence about them, and no bad language - a state of affairs attributed to the example of my predecessor but one, a Captain Tannock, who for three years had been MO to the Regiment.

One day I came across Lawrence and Jimmy Fields by the roadside teasing a fine looking Frontier Force Rifleman and a couple of Punjabi Mussalmen, saying ‘You Madrassi, yes?’ The three drew themselves up to their full height and shook their fists, grinning. I often felt that the Indian soldier, and not merely the Gurkha, was first-rate. The good battalions of Punjabis, Dogras, Jats and FF Rifles all came into that category. In that terrain and climate those who had served with them agreed that they were at least as good as the British soldier. Their own officers of course thought them better than anyone. They had a fatalism and a simplicity of needs which helped them to

endure continued strain, heat and rough living, and they could carry on unperturbed when the British soldiers I had happened to be with could not.

Life with the Field Gunners was luxurious by comparison with the sort of life I had lived with the infantry and even with the Anti/Tank Regiment. For much of the time we were on the move, but we lodged in relative comfort, using houses, tarpaulin shelters and the regimental trucks. My medical gear was kept in the Dodge, in the back of which we put stretchers on top of cases of medical stores. This meant that when the weather was wet, and it soon became very wet, we could sleep anywhere in the truck and did not have to bother about other shelter from the rain. I was usually out with a battery, and lived and ate with my own section, only joining the Officers' Mess when the whole regiment was stopped for several days in a village.

My system when we stopped was to get the best site I could for the RAP - shade from the sun and if necessary shelter from shelling - and give a few clear orders about the main things I wanted done. I never bothered Lawrence about small details or things on which he had his own ideas. I trusted him, and after the Czech doctor I think it was for all of them a relief not to be fussed. I also made a point from the first of getting to know the RSM and he was always a help in making sure that when possible we were given good sites.

During most of April we were in the part of Central Burma that lies between Meiktila, the Irrawaddy and Allammyo. The country was generally low and undulating, often dry and rocky. On the 24th April we reached Taungdwingi, in latitude 20 degrees N. On the previous day we had driven from Magwe, a lovely drive over a good road, on our left scrub and desert and on our right the low valley of the Irrawaddy already richly green. The day was overcast and the air cool. Far in the south-west we could see row on row of heavy flat-based clouds from which streaks of rain slanted down on the paddy.

The general character of that part of the Central Plain was barren. The soil was baked hard and the vegetation except where there was irrigation was chiefly thorn and cactus. Large tracts of the country were irrigated, using dams, canals and lesser watercourses called 'distributaries'. By this means the paddy fields could be flooded and

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

during at least part of the dry season luxuriant vegetation grew in the villages that were near canals - great trees, banana groves, palms and grass - 'proper' grass. During the monsoon large areas were flooded. Even in the barren parts we came on little villages where there were a few trees, and often a couple of deep wells - 20 to 30 feet deep. Houses were raised off the ground, and every village had its pagodas, and often a Pongyi Kyaung, or combined school and small monastery. We would see a few chickens, children, and a pongyi or two with shaven head and saffron robe. In the poorest villages we found books in tumbledown buildings round the pagodas. The books were in good condition, printed in Burmese script on excellent paper - about 10in by 8in, and well bound with leather. They, and the children's exercise books, gave us some idea of life in peacetime Burma.

We did not see many Burmese, and the pongyis we saw had a sullen look, but I did see a unit of Burmese 'guerillas' who were said to have been actively on our side. They carried an assortment of weapons: silver-plated pistols, Japanese swords, shotguns, Jap rifles, crossbows, spears, sharpened bamboos, dahs and, said the Padre, blowpipes. The only blowpipes I saw were those used by villagers to hunt frogs in roadside ditches; the pipes were ten feet long and made of bamboo, and the eighteen-inch arrows were barbed and feathered. The villagers shot the frogs that sunned themselves at the edges of ponds and strung the bodies on arrow shafts carried over the shoulder.

On the 20th April I slept on red sandy soil. We were near a cluster of pagodas whose bells tinkled in the evening breeze. The afternoon had been hot and wherever I looked over the plain the distance seemed to quiver in the heated air.

The 25th April was a typical moving day of 114 Field Regiment. I was up at 0530, breakfasted at 0700, packed up, and then waited until 1000 with several false alarms that we were to move. At every mile or so along the road there was a stop, never long enough for a brew-up. We reached our destination about three in the afternoon. There I chose a place for my section and we dug three slit trenches. During and after that we drank tea. Between four and six in the afternoon I held a sick parade. I ate near my truck and a new Padre came over for a talk. We sat in the open under the moon sipping whisky until 2130,

It was after sundown when he joined me, and I was not wearing a shirt.

‘You ought to be riddled with malaria, Doc’ he remarked, ‘yet you look disgustingly healthy.’ He noticed that I was squatting on my heels, and added, ‘You seem to have been out here some time.’ His name was Richard Crookes, a tall, lean man from Pembroke College, Cambridge, with personality and intelligence, and a face like a curate. He was not long from home, and he felt the heat. Remembering Dimapur the year before, I could sympathise - we were getting daily temperatures of over 110 degrees in the shade.

We were joined over our drink by the Battery Commander, Warren Bugler, who had just heard that he had been granted a month’s home leave, and wanted to celebrate. He was a leathery faced well-built man, tanned, clean shaven, with dark hair. He was very interested in the men’s welfare, and had a good way with them; he was quiet, observant, intelligent and perhaps a bit religious - he started telling the Padre how to do his job. A nice fellow.

At Taungdwingi the battery had stopped for the night astride a road down which a south-bound Japanese convoy was expected. It arrived in the dark and drove blindly into the muzzles of the 25-pounders which were aimed to shoot straight up the middle of the road. The destruction at close range was such that there was no work for me.

We were halted one day by trouble on the road ahead. A 5.5in. gun belonging to a ‘Medium’ Regiment had had an accident. It was an accident to which these guns, the men told me, were prone. The gun was firing on some target miles away and a shell had exploded on leaving the muzzle - a ‘premature’, it was called. In action, when casualties were part of the day’s work, men took things as they came, but when something went wrong like what happened that day they nursed a smouldering resentment against everything and everyone. One man had been badly hurt and after I had done what I could we sent him to the nearest Field Ambulance.

During the ten days to the end of April the batteries were a good deal in action in support of units that were clearing Japs from positions in the neighbourhood of the road and river. At night, as well as using

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

the Dodge truck, we sheltered from the heavy rain in derelict houses and sometimes in roofless buildings over which we rigged tarpaulins. Heavy rainstorms had now begun.

We heard on the wireless of the triumphant advance of the Allies into Europe, but our men did not 'enter beautiful little towns to be greeted by waving crowds of laughing girls with baskets of fruit and bouquets of brightly coloured flowers.' Instead, at the beginning of May, they drove or trudged all day in rain, and came at the end to empty villages.

I went out in the dark and rain one night to investigate a slow rending crash which turned out to be the collapse of a grass and bamboo basha - when I arrived with a torch I could just make out a mass of grass matting and bamboo poles from under which came a subdued noise - bewildered muttering and muffled ejaculations as the men crawled over one another trying to find a way out. Every few minutes the grass would lift and I would see a groping hand or heaving bottom. Someone called out, 'Seen Spitfire anywhere, Jim?' Jim was Fields, my batman, and Spitfire was the Padre's batman, a slow, meek and unpractical man, middle-aged and scraggy-looking, very slow on the uptake. His name was Dudley and as well as 'Spitfire' he was known as Dud.

On 4th May we came through Prome in pouring rain; it was a desolate, derelict and empty town fallen to ruin and overgrown with weeds. North of Prome the road ran for long distances by the Irrawaddy and through squalls of rain we had glimpses of the great sheet of water with here and there what looked like islands. Prome was distinguished by an enormous brick and plaster Buddha; I came back a week later to see it; it was 90 feet high and had taken 15 years to build; I measured the fingers as about eight feet long. That night we reached Schwedaung and my people settled into a tin-roofed teak house that was in good condition. The adjutant put up a sign - 'Bedside Manor'.

I was driving a jeep south over a bit of open country on the 8th May when I came across one of our 15-cwt trucks halted, with a group of men gathered round the back of it. They were listening to a wireless that was fitted inside the truck; they had it tuned to the BBC

Overseas and Forces Programme. The European war was over. A surrender had been signed at some place called Lüneberg Heath. Ten days back we had been overjoyed to hear a rumour that something like this was going to happen; now we were rather indifferent about it. What, we wondered, were the chances of being relieved by troops from home? That was all; we had no great feeling about the end of Nazi Germany.

I went on my way and saw another jeep approaching. The day was hot and dry, and the newcomer sent up a cloud of brown dust; it was Danny James. I was able as it happened to give him a cigar from home and he produced two 12 oz. cans of American beer - Budweiser. It was a very light lager hot from being in full sunlight. Danny was shortly going to China. He told me how Custer Watson had gone up to Maymyo from Kyaukse and there had painted for the benefit of some nurses too heroic a picture of his own doings to please Danny. Din Smith he remembered with more affection, recalling Din's first night as a newcomer on the Myinmu bridgehead. They were sleeping under mosquito nets at the side of a slit trench and each time a shell came over Danny had noticed that Din raised a corner of his net to see what Danny was doing; he was damned if he would go into shelter before Danny, the 'Old Hand'.

The Regiment settled at Schwedaung for a week while individual batteries or troops of guns went out to villages and across the Irrawaddy in support of units 'mopping up' Japs to the west of the river and in the Pegu Yomas.

On the 13th May I encountered a Burman walking down the road with a basket of mangoes on his head, the first I had seen in Burma; some Indian soldiers and I bought the lot. They were quite ripe and I ate mine under a shady tree. They were very good.

The monsoon was not yet fully on us but each day we had very heavy rainstorms that cooled the air. We all wore slacks, except that in the evening I took to wearing the lungyi, a cool sort of Burmese skirt. I slept naked during those days, under a mosquito net, sweating; in winter I had slept under two blankets, in March under one blanket, but feeling the cold; and in early April clothed, with no other covering.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

There was very little work at Schwedaung. Sick parades were small;

I toured the camp each day to get to know people, and to look at the kitchens, water supply and latrines; and from time to time I visited medical units like the nearest Field Ambulance. Occasionally I had calls that were slightly out of the ordinary. One was to examine (to see that he was not on the point of death) a man who had been lucky in a draw for a month's 'Blighty leave'. He arrived in a jeep, bursting to be off, and his grinning, flushed face was pleasant to see - he was only 21, and in a way I envied him his luck. I would not have dared to find anything so wrong with him that it stopped his going. Another call that was unusual was to see a signaller from a Medium Regiment (the big 5.5in. guns). He was trembling and speechless and I thought at first that he had malaria, but he had no fever and after sitting for a few minutes he became quieter. It was a blazing hot day, and we were in a dry exposed place with no water and no shade. He said that when sitting at his wireless he would get to feel that he must 'do something', jump up and stamp his feet, scream and wave his arms about - 'but if I do they'll think I'm mad, so I try not to'. He felt 'bottled up and about to burst'. That was all, except for a fear of not doing his work efficiently. He had been in the east for three years and wanted to see his wife and children (he began to cry when talking of them) but he was not the only one. When he had told his story and I had assured him that he was not going mad, and told him that if it helped he could always come and talk to me I saw his Battery Commander and found that the man was a bit of a hero - generally liked - the only man in the unit who had personally shot a Jap, a rare feat, I supposed, in a Medium Regiment. I told the BC that a bit of encouragement would do no harm and I never saw him again.

At Schwedaung I made friends with a young girl called Ma Kyia; she had had her ears pierced, and her father brought her to me because the small wounds were septic and messy, and spoiled her appearance. When cured and beautiful again she rewarded me by coming in her best clothes with jasmine flowers arranged like a tiara in her hair, bringing a basket of mangoes. She whispered their Burmese name; it sounded to me like 'Deirdre' with the two 'r's omitted. It was the 15th May and the mangoes were lovely and ripe.

Then her father came to say that he wanted her head shaved below a line above the ears, and could he borrow my razor? Small girls in Burma wore their hair in a top-knot; half an inch above the level of the ears the hair was left as a sort of fringe, and below the fringe the scalp was shaved. Ma Kyia's father had noticed that I shaved with a cutthroat and it was this that he wanted to borrow; but a cutthroat is a delicate instrument and I was unwilling to let mine be used by anyone else so I shaved her myself. Later, her uncle took to sitting with me and as he had a bit of English I began to learn a few words of Burmese. I discovered that in Burma you changed your name with age. For instance Ma Kyia at 40 would be called Ta Kyia and her uncle, now called Maung Mia Ten, in middle age would be Ko Mia Ten and in old age U Mia Ten. All this I picked up slowly and it was some time before I realised that the prefixes like Maung and U corresponded to words of address like 'brother' and 'old man'. I had taken to wearing a lungyi about my middle and while we were talking one evening Ma Kyia came along and with a smirk pointed at my waist and said something to her uncle; unwittingly, I had knotted the lungyi round my waist with a knot used only by women and this had to be adjusted. I found pronunciation difficult and made ridiculous mistakes like suggesting that we make a trip on the Irrawaddy in a bullock-cart: to the untaught ear the words for boat and bullock-cart were very much alike. Ma Kyia's love for me lasted until she found that my driver, Schlaepfer, had an inexhaustible supply of chocolate.

I began about then to give talks on VD to gatherings of BORs, a battery at a time. I had never felt at home lecturing and was pleasantly surprised to find how easy it was to talk about a subject you knew, and in which the audience was deeply interested. In the end I had lectured all the batteries and had extended my repertoire to include the other subject in which they were all deeply interested - sex. 'Audience participation' and 'emotional involvement' were such that during a talk one or two of the biggest and toughest-looking regularly passed out in a faint: it was gratifying to be so appreciated.

On the 25th May I summoned the 15-cwt after lunch and with Schlaepfer and Lawrence went off to vaccinate the men of a battery that was about ten miles away. Schlaepfer was at the wheel, I sat on his right and Lawrence was on my right, sitting on a toolbox above the

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

running board. The cabin was covered with canvas for shade, the windscreen down flat to give a breeze. We left the shabbiness of the small town behind us and followed a road that ran straight and smooth between rows of tamarinds. The big leafy trees gave a flickering shade and between the trees we looked down a little to the level paddy fields on either side. The countryside around was flat at first, mostly paddy, with here and there a clump of palms and other trees marking a village. It was early afternoon and the country seemed deserted. After a few miles we reached low hills, about 200 feet high, mere undulations in the generally flat plain; there were more trees, and freshly sprouting paddy with a delicate green of its own. The trees were young, growing in clumps, shrubberies in between the paddy. Their leaves were shiny and new-looking, with many shades of green, depending on how the light caught the upper or under surfaces. Soon we came to a small village that the war had not touched. The bashas were tidy, the people looked leisurely and well-fed, and there was a small bazaar. An appetising smell of curry was in the air and we saw livestock on the road - ducks, chickens, cows, a sow with piglets, sleek fat goats and two well groomed horses. Behind the village, on a wooded hill, was the best kept pagoda I had seen. It was shapely, about 80 feet high, tapering; the gold paint was fresh and there were none of the flashes and squiggles of paint that cheapened the look of many pagodas. At the village we left the road and took a track southwest through thickets of bamboo and over streams to more open country. Near at hand the red and ochre of the track contrasted vividly with the rich green on either side. In the far distance was a bluish range of hills beyond which lay the Indian Ocean. Above the hills were threatening banks of white and grey monsoon cloud.

As we bumped along the track or squelched through streams I saw a variety of birds that made up for a comparative lack of birds in the last few weeks. Ankle deep in water were snowy white egrets with black bills and legs. They stood about two and a half feet high, had white crests and moved very delicately. With them were 'pond herons' or 'paddy birds'. They had white wings, grey backs and rusty heads and necks. Their bills were a faint light blue and they stood about 18 inches high. Another small heron was with them, - the 'Night Heron' - a black, grey and white heron about the size of a Paddy bird but more round-shouldered. Drongos, or king crows, and

bulbuls were common in bushes by the track; the Drongo looked like a blackbird with a forked tail. I saw no kites, vultures or jays, all of which would be common in such a place in India.

We reached the village where the guns were; I did my vaccinations; we had a mug of coffee each and at 16.30 started back. The sun was behind us and in that rainy season the air was clear, showing the distant trees and shrines in sharp detail. There was wind enough to refresh us and the knowledge that so little of the day had still to be endured helped us enjoy the evening with some degree of contentment. We agreed that it would be nice at home to see a film of the Burma war. Schlaepfer had so far recovered his good humour - he had lost it in the morning at the idea of taking his newly cleaned truck out over a muddy road - that he tried to run over a brilliantly coloured red, green and yellow snake which crosses the road.

The village we had come through in the afternoon was now awake - the golden pagoda was bright in the setting sun, the villagers were by the wells or strolling under the trees. On the road we met two young priests with shaven heads; they stood upright and had a calm and dignified look; they wore the saffron robes of their class and one of them carried an open parasol. They were about 18 years old and were probably novices.

Farther along the road we passed a well. A young woman clad only in a lungyi stood beside it pouring water from a bucket over her body. She had very black hair and light brown skin and was slim and good-looking. All along the way, now that it was evening, we passed Burmese either on foot or in bullock carts. They were active only in the mornings and evenings. Schwedaung, when we reached it, was hotter than any place where we had been during the day; and drier, whiter and dustier.

I took off my clothes at sunset, stood on the verandah and poured cold water over myself using half an old coconut shell as a ladle. I dried my hair and left my body wet. I wrapped a towel round my waist and sat on the bed. I had one bottle of beer left from my month's ration. A day like that was like an issue of fresh pineapples in a ration of bully beef and biscuits.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

On another day in May I drove with Schlaepfer to visit a battery that was by the Irrawaddy. On the way a front wheel of the truck got stuck in a deep hole that we did not see on the flooded road; Schlaepfer went to look for a gun tractor to pull us out while I sat on the river bank in pouring rain, with no shirt, enjoying the feel of cool wet air on my skin, and watching the squalls of rain that swept over the water. After the rain there were fine views in the distance, where a range of hills was clear; the clouds had a washed look, and the sky was very pale.

On the 29th May I crossed the river with George Abbott, to vaccinate the men in his troop. We left at 0830 and crossed the Irrawaddy in a native boat with an outboard motor. On the far side we drove for about 12 miles up into the hills towards Taungup, every now and then crossing a clear pebbly stream; we came across abandoned Jap motors and searched them for loot. All we found was a car battery; I was not much impressed but it turned out to be in working order and George looked on it as a great find. Our jeep stuck in a chaung on the way back to the river and we missed the ferry by three minutes. However, a company of Gurkhas was stationed at the crossing point and after lunching with them we passed the afternoon swimming in the river until the ferry came back.

By the 31st May the sun was passing to the north of us at noon. The coolest hour of the day was just after dawn, about 0645, when 80 degrees felt cool and refreshing. We moved south to Letpadan and west from the main Rangoon road to the quiet village of Sitkwin where for the next three months the regiment was to rest.



Chapter 19 Sitkwin

Sitkwin was about two miles west of the main road from Prome to Letpadan, Tharrawaddy and Rangoon. The regiment settled in towards the end of the first week in June. The Japanese had by now been cleared from our part of Burma although there may have been some stragglers in the Arakan Yomas to the west of the Irrawaddy. The regiment was no longer in action and for the next three months we were busy with little more than maintenance, repair work, training and recreation.

Sitkwin had a pleasant broad tree-lined main street, bordered by fine houses in their own gardens; they had framework of teak and walls of bamboo matting. Similar houses lined the side streets. All the houses were raised off the ground and approached by a few steps. Many of the roofs were of corrugated iron, necessary in the heavy rains. There was a school run by pongyis or monks, and a Police Station which consisted of little more than an office and a rudimentary lock-up. The pongyis occupied a large house which I never visited. There were a number of pagodas on the outskirts.

Sitkwin had not been much damaged by war, the houses for the most part were in good condition and although we commandeered some of them and had our gun parks on land all round the village the inhabitants greeted us civilly; the Burmese, particularly the pongyis, with aloofness, and the Karens, Chinese and Indians in friendly fashion. It was delightful to see the Burmese in the cool of morning and evening sauntering up and down the streets clad in the long skirts and small blouses or coats of the country, the women wearing sandals and wide-brimmed hats, carrying parasols and smoking cheroots, usually of the fat white sort. The 'Whacking white cheroots' were

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

made of a maize leaf rolled into a cylinder six inches long and an inch in diameter, filled with tobacco. The tightly rolled end was put in the mouth and the other end closed with a twist or tie. They were lighted at the closed end.

The men wore bright coloured silks on their heads and the women, bare-headed, wore their hair in a bun, usually with a comb in it. As well as the skirt or lungyi women wore a little jacket or engyi that buttoned right across the front; their underwear consisted of a long embroidered cotton or linen vest with shoulder straps. Sandals were only worn out of doors; there was a strap or cord for the big toe and the four small toes were left free. Domestic animals completed the scene: dogs, poultry, and piglets; from under the houses hens and cockerels fluttered wildly when alarmed.

Regimental Headquarters occupied one pleasant house and I commandeered another across the road for the medical staff and sick bay. I allocated a spacious room on the ground floor as the MI room where I could see patients; two other rooms on the same floor served as medical store and sick bay. My staff and I lived on the first floor, where there were three rooms. Lawrence and two others slept in one, Richard Crookes the padre had a room to himself where he could see people in private, and I shared the third with John Palmer, Regimental Intelligence Officer. It was a fine room with teak floors on which we spread grass mats. There were comfortable bamboo beds, a remarkable dressing table with drawers and full-length mirrors, and several earthenware pots which someone had filled with flowers. The walls were of woven bamboo. The windows could be closed with flaps made either of woven bamboo like that used for the walls or of bamboo strips criss-crossed in a more open pattern. Through the windows we saw only foliage: mango trees, palms and a striking tree with scarlet-orange flowers; it was known to us as the Flame of the Forest, and we often admired it as we drove on the country roads. Downstairs in the MI room there were a couple of tables, some upright chairs and, in a corner of the room, a water filter. This consisted of two earthenware pots one above the other. The upper pot held a layer of coarse sand through which water dripped into the lower pot; it gave us cool clear water at all times. The garden before the house was about 15 yards square and had growing in it jackfruit, lime, mango,

betel nut, betel leaf, banana, papaya and tamarind, and a neem tree - you could use the leaves of the neem to keep off fleas and bed-bugs, and the frayed ends of its twigs made a good toothbrush. There were also in the garden a hairy black pig and some fowls.

We had hardly moved in on the first night when a man and a girl were brought to me with burns on hands and feet, and I guessed that I should soon have a civilian practice. I enjoyed attending to the Burmese: they did not come unless they had something definite wrong with them, like a cut or a boil or a burn. Sitkwin bore one or two scars of war and it was because of this that I had my next patient from the village. Near the outskirts was a large store of rice which at some time had been set on fire, either by the retreating Japanese or accidentally by our gunfire. Before our arrival a small Indian boy playing in the neighbourhood had been 'dared' to jump into the rice which, though it looked harmless, was still smouldering below the surface. He had second degree burns a week old and the blistered feet were septic. After I cut away the dead stuff and cleaned him up he healed very well, and my modest success and willingness to help established trust; a visit from the boy's parents to bring a few gifts gradually grew into a custom of bringing sick people to see me every day. There were fevers, wounds and infections, and common diseases that I could recognise and treat; there were also a great number of complainants whose illnesses, even when real, I had no means of diagnosing.

I had to find some way of communicating with my patients; the problem solved itself when I found that one of the idle spectators in my MI room lived across the road. He was Maung Hla who spoke English and was willing to interpret; he was also always ready to take me to other villages if someone there was sick, and at his house he would put up anyone from a distant village who needed to see me daily. He wore an absurd little hat of plaited grass with a very narrow brim. He had two children of his own and was very good with children. He was naturally inquisitive but if his 'do gooding' had any ulterior motive I never saw it. He was a good sort, glad to be of help. Before the war he had been a clerk in the oil wells at Chauk, near Yenangyaung, and after I left Burma I had a letter from him to say that he had got a job with the government Civil Affairs Organisation.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

Late one night Maung Hla took me to an Indian woman in labour. During two years in the army I had become used to fevers and wounds of all kinds but childbirth was something that had not come my way and it was with very little confidence that I went in the dark to a small shack on the outskirts of the village. There was a midwife in Sitkwin and I found her sleeping under the patient's roof. Her own child suffered from impetigo and was also there, a bearer of infection, whom I was not at all pleased to see; fortunately he was already being treated by Bombardier Lawrence and was painted all over with the violet anti-septic that we used. As far as I could tell the labour was going well, except that the mother was suffering from exhaustion; thinking that after a good rest she would get on and finish the job by herself, I gave her a dose of some medicine we used to calm the nerves of soldiers who were over- excited and went back to my bed wondering what on earth to do if things went badly next day. Before dawn I was called again and to my surprise was handed a note which read,

'19th June 45. Dear Doctor, Thanks very much. It is with great joy that I inform you a boy is delivered exactly at 2 o'clock a.m. The boy and the mother are both in pink of condition. Everybody in the household render their heartfelt thanks to you. Faithfully yours, R Kahn.'

More children were born in the village and as time went on I found that nature worked wonders and that masterly inactivity worked wonders too - for my reputation.

A few days later two pretty girls presented themselves at the MI room; they were willing, they said, to act as nurses and interpreters, they had done some nursing and would help in the MI room; also they would happily conduct me to other parts of Sitkwin to see patients too sick to be brought to me. I engaged them on the spot and never regretted it, but my excursions with them were sometimes misunderstood by officers at RHQ and I became the object of slightly envious raillery.

The gunners, as was the way with British soldiers, soon had friends in every part of the village and did a brisk trade in bananas, chickens, mangoes and perhaps purchases less innocent. Even at

Sitkwin all was not parasols and smiling faces, and behind many of the bamboo walls there were unfortunates desperately sick with neglected infections or untreatable illness.

Water for the regiment was brought from river or well in the regiment's water-cart, a small motor tanker on the back of which some humorist had stencilled,

‘GUNGA DIN Mark II, 200 Gals’.

The villagers drew water from the wells in buckets hung from poles; the bucket was balanced by a weight on the short end of the pole. Sometimes, when the pole was not in use at the well, a buffalo was tethered to the long end and so given a little scope on which to move about and graze. All our water, whether from the river or from the deep brick-lined village wells, however fresh and pure it might look, had to be treated before use; for in every Sitkwin back garden was a household cesspit, an open brick-lined hole full of ordure seething with maggots, the breeding ground of flies and a perpetual headache for me.

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Soon I had settled into a daily round which changed little while I was at Sitkwin. I would be up at 0530, join in PT for half an hour, and have a ‘bath’; I used half a coconut shell to pour cold water from a bucket over me, standing up. After breakfast I did the men's sick parade, which never took more than three quarters of an hour, and visited the batteries to talk with the Battery Commanders about anything that affected their men and concerned me.

Between 0945 and 1030 I did a round of visits to household civilian patients who lived not too far away. Then, from 1100 for an hour and a half, I held a sick parade for civilians.

I had many Burmese patients in the mornings and we were always short of the right drugs for them. The Burmese nurses did the dressings for I did not want the BORs to have anything to grouse about if I could help it.

In the afternoons the rain came down steadily, fresh and cool. From 1400 to 1500 I went the round of the unit latrines. After that I

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

was available to be called out to see new cases in the village: my Burmese teacher's nephew, aged 8, was sick with malaria, an old woman had a poisoned leg, a middle-aged woman had a benign growth in the womb, another had violent pains due to kidney stones; there was no end to it and by six o'clock I was ready for a bottle of beer.

On the day I saw the woman with kidney stones the regiment held an evening cinema show in the open air; I attended with a small boy (a patient) who sat on my knee until my leg was numb, but someone was searching for me at the cinema, someone from the family of the woman I had seen in the afternoon: she was much better and they had a packet of black cheroots for me. On another day my routine was interrupted by a call to see an old man who could not pass water. I took him to the civil hospital which by now had opened at Letpadan because although I could give him immediate relief I could not cure him. So it went on.

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Each day at 1600 a Burmese teacher who happened to own the house I had commandeered called to give the Padre, the IO and me a language lesson. He was spotlessly dressed in shirt, lungyi and slippers. He had been a schoolmaster and because he understood our questions he was a better teacher than someone less intelligent would have been. He had a sense of humour - more, perhaps, than was good for him, for after the end of the war he wrote to tell me that he was, poor chap, for the time being in gaol 'Because I made a fun with the Police inspector'. Richard and John Palmer (the IO) and I would sit round on low chairs squeezing information out of him. I asked most of the questions because I had already tried to pick up bits of the language and had a head start. For the same reason and because I had a purpose in learning I also learnt more from each lesson than they. Richard complained one day that we were going too fast for him and I decided to give him extra lessons myself; if he could not keep up with us we should all have to slow down; I felt that ideally there should be a teacher for each pupil.

I wrote in an exercise book my own phonetic version of what I was being taught and was able to pick up a certain amount of grammar

while at the same time extending my vocabulary. I was delighted by the picturesqueness of the language: how fitting to say when you have a headache that your ‘head bites’ and to refer to malaria, in which the fever rises and falls like a bird in flight, as ‘bird fever’, and to call a common and apparently almost universal kind of venereal disease ‘boy fever’.

With interpreters to help when I got into difficulty it was not long before I could question the villagers about their ordinary affairs and their complaints and tell them how to take their medicines. In social intercourse I had to be more careful. When pleased to meet someone it was customary to say “Win tha de” - my bowels feel warm, and not to say “Win twa de” - my bowels are running, apparently a common mistake. My range of grammar and vocabulary was limited to phrases regularly used between doctor and patient, a severe handicap at a tea party; after long search for an inoffensive topic the best I could do might be to start the conversation with a bright smile, saying airily ‘I do not have a headache today’.

The Burmese could be emotional and violent and I encountered extremes of gentle courtesy and hot-tempered physical assault. One morning a young man was brought with a head wound, a saucer-like depression in his skull, half the size of a tennis ball. When I asked how he had come by it he said ‘My uncle hit me.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Well, my bullock strayed into his garden and he lost his temper.’ Although the blow seemed for the time being to have cured the quarrel I had to send him into hospital.

My patients were of all races - Burmese, Indians, Chinese and Karens, many of whom were Christians and spoke English, The only people with whom I had very little to do were the young priests, the pongyis with shaven heads and saffron robes who seemed always aloof and perhaps hostile.

I was brought presents from time to time: cheroots, coconuts and especially bananas, of which I usually had a branch in one of our rooms, covered with a blanket to ripen the fruit. One day a child of eight whom I had been treating for a ragged and septic wound in the hand came to me in the middle of the BOR sick parade and took my hand. He put in it a small bundle, saying very shyly,

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

‘Chet-u yu la bi, I have brought eggs.’

Wrapped in a kerchief were a dozen brown eggs.

The gunners gave me very little work. Officers and senior NCOs made sure that everyone took his daily suppressive Mepacrine tablet for malaria and in general they were a fit crowd of men. From time to time we went out into the country for a run of a few miles in which we all joined. It was only rarely that I had to attend to anything serious among the men or officers.

One of those occasions was late at night when I was asked to see a new officer who had just joined the regiment. I found him lying covered with blankets, shivering violently and semi-delirious with high fever. He had a bad attack of benign tertian malaria and next day I told him that he ought to be admitted to a Field Ambulance. He protested violently at this and as I had probably treated as many cases of malaria in the last year as anyone then in the Field Ambulance I consented to look after him where he was. Charlie Armour was red haired and freckle faced and looked about 17; before long he was as well as the rest of us. He had a good brain and would soon be going home to resume an interrupted Cambridge career reading Geography. He had been trained in survey by the army and my first thought was that here was someone who might be persuaded to take some leave to explore in the mountains.

Only occasionally did the regimental work pile up so that I felt harassed: George Abbott was taken ill and had to go into hospital, Paddy Whelan began to behave queerly, I had a lot of medical inspections to do and the CO was for a time very testy with a stiff neck; it cured itself after I provided him with a masseuse from the village. We became good friends and I treasured some of his remarks: ‘It’s not an officer’s job to make himself popular, it’s his job to make himself respected.’ He pulled my leg in a good-natured way about what he called my ‘private practice’, the size of the private income I derived from it and the benefits in kind - ‘The Doc had to be lifted again off that nurse to get him here in time for dinner.’ ‘Happy’ Apted, a prospective schoolmaster with glasses and curly hair, who replaced John Palmer as IO and shared my room, was the only person

interested in what I really did in the village. Most were indifferent or made a joke.

One day the CO inquired into the 'Sick State' and I asked him if he wanted a daily return with details of how many there were with each sort of disease. 'No, No' he said, 'I leave all that sort of thing to you.' The nearest we came to a disagreement was one day when he told me that he expected me to report to him any man with VD. I had just told the men that they could come to me about VD in confidence, and this put me in a difficulty. I told the CO that if he insisted I should first have to tell the men that I would be reporting those with VD, and that until that was understood I could not do as he asked. He grunted and I heard no more about it.

While we were at Sitkwin a Professor La Bu, once principal of a college in Rangoon, came to talk to the regiment about Burma during the Japanese occupation. He was small, about 5 ft 6ins.in height, and very slight, aged about 50. He had black hair with a few greyish flecks, light brown skin and a characteristically Burmese face, with eyes less mongoloid than I was accustomed to see. His hair was cropped short and he wore a dazzling white shirt, unbelievably white compared with our drab greens. His shirt had no collar and was fastened at the neck with a silver stud. He wore a dark blue lungyi and over all a short grey collarless jacket of embroidered silk with cloth fastenings fashioned in elegant loops. The whole costume was smart and the impression he gave was of neatness and delicacy. He seemed fastidious and physically did not look robust. The only item in his dress which jarred was a pair of shiny black European shoes. I dined in the mess with him after he had given the men a talk about Burma and I was able to ask him a lot of questions. He liked to indulge a sort of 'I know English language' style of humour: 'When the Japanese first came they talked of "co-prosperity" but it soon became clear that the prosperity was for them and the "co-operating" for us', 'When my friend was in hospital the surgeon did the operating and my friend the co-operating.' I could imagine him living blandly with the Japanese, keeping his own counsel, betraying nothing. He told me with no change of expression, no stiffening of the body, no tremor of his voice, that the Japanese did to prisoners 'things that make my blood boil'.

I did not ever know what he felt.

His worst experiences, it seemed, were being accused of hiding when he had gone behind a cactus to empty his bladder, and being mistaken for a Jap and almost shot by Americans near Myitkina. Neither experience seemed very terrible to his audience of seasoned gunners. He said that the Japs came with overtures of friendship, but that their behaviour deteriorated steadily during their stay in Burma. To him, their awfulness was due less to atrocities than to their lack of respect for Buddhism and for persons, and to the presence of the Kempe tai or Secret Police in Rangoon. Their chief offences in his eyes were walking into shrines with their boots on, bathing naked in the open, slapping the faces of Burmese officials and ordering priests to draw water for them. These were particularly odious offences but fear, he said, was the worst thing of all and it was release from fear that made everyone happy at the moment of liberation. He told of a Japanese Major-General asking the Burmese Minister of Health if he knew that plague (ordinarily carried by fleas) was carried by mosquitoes, and spoiled the story by adding, 'Imagine a high-ranking Army officer insulting a Minister by asking him whether he knows something known to every schoolboy!'

He told me that the irrigation system in Burma as it was in 1945 was built by the British, but that before the British an earlier and more primitive form of irrigation had been in use; he could not give any details of it. The Burmese, he said, bury their dead, except for the pongyis, who are cremated. The pongyis he described as teachers who gave their lives to meditation and learning; they performed no ceremonies like burial or marriage but they were invited as honoured men to be present on such occasions. Boys, who all attend the pongyi kyaungs, go through a novitiate of a few months or a year whether they are to be priests or not, and during that time they wear the saffron robes and carry begging bowls. I was in the Mess the next night when the CO started to talk about La Bu, what a wretched fellow he was and what a rotten talk he had given. I said that I had rather liked him and after waiting a moment the C.O. said, 'I thought he was a frightful wet' and the adjutant chipped in 'Yes, sir, all Burmese are like that.' It seemed odd that a man like the CO should crash through Burma and see so little to interest him by the way.

It was customary in Burma to leave shoes outside on the steps when entering a house, and the teak floors of the better houses were always lovely to look at. One day, before I knew better, I was taken by her son to see an old lady with chronic tuberculosis, and failed to take off my boots. The son who took me to the house was a graduate of Rangoon and her other son, who was a doctor, had been Civil Surgeon at Prome. I felt very small when I realised my gaffe.

One night in the middle of June John Palmer and I watched a violent rainstorm. Our windows had no glass and the large flaps that opened upwards and outwards were wide open as usual. About 1730 the sky grew dark and heavy with blue and grey clouds. The wind rose and swayed the topmost branches of the palms behind the house. The sweaty heat of the day changed to a chill, cold enough to make me shiver. There were a few warning flashes of lightning and a roll of thunder. We went to the window and leant on the sill, he in shorts, I in a lungyi. Immediately below was some tin roofing, then a betel-nut tree that looked like a palm and beyond it a papaya tree, tall and slender with broad, deeply divided leaves at the top. There were many banana trees, a few toddy palms, and farthest away some huge tamarinds and coco palms, in the tops of which egrets were settling down for the night, their plumage looking very white against the dark sky. Everywhere between the trees were tin roofs. The wind rose quickly. The egrets one by one took wing and struggled heavily with the gale; the palm fronds began to wave wildly to and fro. The storm worked itself up to a fury, lashing the leaves with rain and pushing the palms backwards and forwards through wide arcs. The din on the roofs was tremendous but we could hear above it the swish, swish of the banana leaves and palm fronds. It was a scene which fulfilled all my imagined picture of the monsoon. The rain was torrential, the wind violent and the swaying trees, the huge wet banana leaves and the storm-driven birds, made me say to myself 'This is it - The Tropics.'

Yacoob the Indian barber came from the village to cut my hair; he told me that when the Japs came in 1942 his father had set out for India on foot. He had had no news of him, and when I offered to send a letter for him to his home in Bihar he was effusively grateful; he began to call me 'Cha Cha'- Uncle, and wanted me to call him

‘Battija’ - Nephew. He said that all he wanted was to say that at Sitkwin all were well, and he produced a letter pathetic in its directness,

“Who is alive there? Did my father reach home? I am alive and well”, Later he wrote more, that went on for page after page of love, of the sadness of separation, and of the pain of having no news.

I never knew if he had any answer.

On the 22nd June the Padre and I went to Rangoon by jeep. We left at 0930 and got there at 1400. In one place I drove the jeep into a paddy field and thought we were stuck for good. The approach to Rangoon was along bomb-cratered highways wide enough for two and sometimes four lanes of traffic. We saw the rubble of recent bombing and the bustle of a seaport that was by then the only supply line for a whole campaign. As we entered the city we passed through a wide park - to the east was a wooded hill and on top of it, above a forest of palms, the Schwe Dagon pagoda - golden, elegant, simple. We carried on into the town past endless sleazy bazaars, with displays of fruit, hardware, footgear and cotton cloth; we came to tramlines, streets pitted and torn by bombs, burnt-out houses, derelict offices, tumble-down warehouses. It was a town unkempt and battered. I strolled among crowds of Chinese in markets where the quality of everything was poor and the price high. The Chinese women wore white blouses, black satin trousers and enormously wide conical bamboo hats, and carried loads at the ends of poles balanced on one shoulder. My first sight of a ship was as I walked in the Chinese market - the masts and funnel of a merchant steamer. After that nothing would do but a visit to the docks, where we saw ships at the quayside and ships at anchor out in Rangoon river. Local boats drifted past; each had three head of cattle in tow, swimming along behind. There was a great coming and going of launches and lighters, and a busy traffic of coolies, crates, cranes and sailors. It was a vision to carry back to my civilian practice inland, to the Burmese and the whacking white cheroots. I came away with two memories, the Schwe Dagon pagoda and the waterfront. Otherwise Rangoon was disappointing, but how great was Kipling and the British Empire!

At Sitkwin we dined al fresco one night on an upstairs verandah. The sky was clear and starry, the night not too hot (80 degrees F at 2100 to be precise); there were fireflies overhead, crickets chirping and somewhere the murmur of Burmese voices. The only other sound was the croaking of frogs - I did not hear any cicadas at Sitkwin. Banana leaves showed shadowy in the light of a hurricane lamp and insects gathered on the table cloth. They crawled a few inches, opened their wings, looped the loop and were back on the table; then they did it all over again. Crickets and grasshoppers jumped; they jumped anywhere and when they landed it was often in someone's drink or soup. If you were tender hearted or fastidious you fished them out and they did it again. A large beetle flew noisily into the wall of the house. He hit it with a thump and dropped to the floor. After rubbing his forehead or whatever beetles do in those short rests after a crash he flew off again with a loud hum which lasted until he crashed once more. In some moods insects filled me with a deep sense of futility.

As for ants, there were myriads and there was every kind. I watched them for hours as they toiled for the common good with no hope of any reward 'save that of knowing that we do Thy will'.

We had some hefty great hairy spiders that, with their webs and their prey, set me thinking about the complexity that went to waste in our universe, a system that reproduced itself without purpose and, subject as it was to natural laws, could not help becoming more and exquisitely evolved, with no ultimate goal.

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Rosita, one of the nurses, a quiet girl with a sense of humour, took me to a Karen Christian service. Richard and I and four BORs sat on chairs in a room about 30 feet by 20 feet, with great round timbers coming up through the floor and going straight up to support the roof. The Karens sat on grass mats on the polished wood floor; their clothes were gaily coloured and made of fine silks. Rosita crossed the room to bring me a hymn book in which the music was written English fashion.

The service was a mixture of the ridiculous and the moving. Four girls sang a hymn in broken English about 'My lovely Saviour being

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

yours' or something of the sort. They sang four parts and though the voices were not good they were in tune and the whole performance reminded me of a village chapel service at home. The Buddhist Burmans could be charming in a thoroughly worldly way that I understood but these Christian Karens had a strange air of mildness and purity. The Karen language sounded musical and soft and I was happy to listen to the voice of an old man praying, though I had no idea what he was saying.

Richard preached a sermon in flowery English, beginning, 'My dear friends, it is with a deep sense, I say it again, with a deep sense...' It occurred to me that none of this would be literally translated into Burmese or Karen but into vivid speech in which 'I understand' was 'My ear turns round', and 'Listen' was 'Prick up your ears', speech in which your bowels 'grew small' when you were sorry and 'glowed' when you were happy.

As I listened to the old Karen translating Richard's sermon I thought his way of speaking a delight to hear; he spoke softly yet strongly and the tone of his voice rose and fell. I could have gone on listening for a long time.

When Maung Hla left Sitkwin his place as my helper was taken by Maung Ba Tin, who had once been a gaoler at Bassein gaol. He was tough, shrewd and good-humoured. He said of one patient before I saw her,

'The old woman talks a great deal. She is like that because she is old.' Of another patient, Daw Pwa Mi, he said 'When there is a doctor about she has much pain until he comes; after he has visited she is always better.'

I could imagine him carrying out his gaoler's duties; he could be stern as Maung Hla could not; his face would set firm and his voice ring out a sure command when those pressing round to get my attention began to be disorderly.

Talk in the Regiment was often of the end of the war. The General Election of 1945 had come and gone. My feeling about it was that I did not care who got in so long as they left me alone to live my own life in my own way. I thought the Conservatives most likely to

do that. Most people in SEAC just did not vote. About one third voted by proxy, a handful actually sent in their votes, and the rest said ‘What the hell?’

Many of the older men were being ‘repatriated’; the Government had suddenly, before the Election, shortened by four months the period of service needed in the Far East to qualify a man for ‘repat’, repatriation, and ‘Roll on Repat’ had become a refrain. But the war was not over for us, and the Generals were upset at losing senior men. I missed the older technically skilled NCOs because I played chess with them. Walton, a wizened sergeant/surveyor with thick steel-rimmed glasses, an oldish man, very slow and quiet, was one of these; he always beat me. With him a single false move led to defeat, and I always knew soon after making the fatal move that the game was lost.

I was unsettled in mind about my own future; I did not want to rush home to doctor, and I wondered about being demobilised where I was, in order to travel in the mountains. Like many young men, I no longer fancied a steady job at home. When the postwar labour government was elected there was a great deal of talk among doctors about the future of medicine at home, and I had an idea that to work in a state-run medical service in a socialist Britain might not at all be what I wanted. My prejudice against a state-run service was strengthened by an encounter with the CO of the British Military Hospital in Rangoon. I had in the regiment a young officer with skin trouble; he had been treated by a skin specialist somewhere else but the trouble recurred, and I took him to the hospital for advice. I could not find any ‘skin man’ to whom I could explain the circumstances, so I went along to the CO of the hospital, a full colonel, RAMC I expected, as a visiting doctor, to be treated as an equal, in the way John Wakeford and the ADMS of 20th Division, and also my CO in the gunners, treated me. I put it to him, perhaps too forthrightly, that I had brought an officer who had been seen by a specialist elsewhere and that, as our regiment was due to move, I did not want to leave him until I knew that he would be in good hands. I had taken a dislike to the set-up at that hospital and I unwisely added for good measure that he would be better off with me and in his own unit than if he were to be pushed about from pillar to post. The Colonel was furious and shouted at me to put the patient in a ward and clear out of his hospital.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

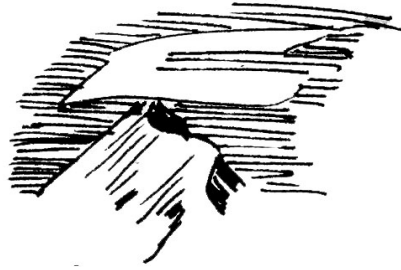
I left at once but took the patient with me. I was very glad later that I had done so: he was much happier to be staying with the regiment and very soon his skin condition began to heal.

The experience left me with a vision of what the General Practitioner might feel when a bureaucratic hospital official was rude to him. In private medicine the Specialist who wished to succeed had to be careful how he addressed the GPs who brought him his bread and butter, but the position of the GP vis-à-vis the hospital might be less happy under the state.

At the end of June, one of our men was found in a compromising position with the daughter of the local Chief of Police, at her home. The Regimental Police rounded up the girls at Sitkwin available for sex and next morning we sent them off to the Field Ambulance at Letpadan to be examined and, if necessary, treated. Perhaps they knew what it was all about but they certainly looked as if they were off for a jolly day at the sea-side. We packed them in the back of a 15-cwt truck and waved them away, a gaily-dressed, laughing bunch of scamps.

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On 14th July a message came to say that Capt RC Evans was granted '16 days' leave at leave station'. It meant for me a fortnight's trek in the Himalayas and I decided to go to Ranikhet.



Chapter 20 Kumaon Trek

With the promise in my pocket of sixteen days at a leave station I decided to go to Ranikhet in the foothills of the Kumaon Himalaya. I had neither time nor opportunity to find a companion and I decided to rely on finding a porter at Ranikhet. I collected what kit I had that was suitable for the mountains and Richard drove me to Rangoon in his jeep. Although I was going on leave I felt depressed; I wished that I were not going alone, and that I felt fitter.

The Schwe Dagon dominated Rangoon, its golden dome and spire like a flame in the evening light. The night was hot and sticky, and when I packed my gear before dawn I was already sweating freely. After take-off from Mingaladon we circled the Schwe Dagon before heading for Chittagong, a flight of three and a half hours. As the aeroplane climbed I breathed in luxuriously and felt the cold air go down my throat and deep into my lungs. I fell asleep and woke with a feeling of physical well-being that I had not known for months.

Onward passages by air from Chittagong were not easy to find but a Flight-Lieut Williams from Connah's Quay appointed me MO next day to a plane-load of casualties on their way to some Base Hospital. Williams had a bungalow at Chittagong and I passed the evening over a bottle of whisky with him and his Flight Sergeant. The bungalow had a cool, shady verandah facing south where the breezes blew in from the sea.

The big airport at Chittagong was much like any other except that the surface of the runways was of all-weather steel gratings instead of tarmac. There were no trees; only squat groups of huts. Lorries drove everywhere and the sun glared on the wide runways. I watched a lorry unload a group of dark-faced men in drapery that was brilliantly white in the sun; their shadows were sharply outlined on the dry ground.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

Someone in my hearing was talking about Cairo and brought vividly to mind my first sight of the strong light of the tropics. We flew in two hops to Alipore, the airfield for Calcutta, calling on the way at Comilla, and at the end flying low over the whole length of Calcutta, which I was seeing from the air for the first time. I saw a long straight wide street, Chowringhee, two railway stations, Sealdah and Howrah, and in the middle of it all the great Howrah cantilever bridge. Beyond sprawled the temples, palaces and slums of one of the biggest cities in the world.

Calcutta was sticky and enervating, the streets were crowded, and Sikh taxi drivers swerved like madmen past wooden carts, holy cows, pedestrians and trams - trams to which as many clung outside as were crowded within. The Grand Hotel was full and I went to the Astor, a dingy non-alcoholic annexe where six of us shared a bedroom. The shutters were closed and electric fans turned slowly above half-naked forms sprawled on the beds, limbs thrown all ways in the heat of the afternoon. Under the window was an empty silent courtyard where the palms did not stir.

An Anglo-Indian came slowly in from the bathroom, poured out a glass of water, drank, made a wry face and set it down; he picked up his pipe, blew down it and put that down too. He changed his towel for a pair of small blue pants and lowered himself on his bed, lying now on this side and now on that, breathing heavily. Soon he got up, slumped into a cane chair and lit a cigar. The only sound except for the fans over our heads was the chatter of mynah birds and the squealing of kites. Sweating, I dozed until a bearer brought tea.

Everyone in the room was robbed that night. When we woke in the morning every man's wallet with his money and his identity documents had gone, either from his pocket or from under his pillow. The thief, a West African soldier, was caught but nothing that we had lost was recovered. I had diarrhoea and was in a foul temper when I went to get new papers, identity photographs and money. In Chowringhee I passed a young and immaculately turned out brigadier who reminded me of Shakespeare's popinjay staff officer - 'he made me mad to see him shine so brisk'. Some devil made me look him in the eye and walk straight on without saluting. When I had gone a dozen yards I heard an angry bellow behind me, 'Hi, you.' I knew all

right at whom he was shouting and swung on my heel to be lectured on how to behave to my betters.

No berth was to be had on the crowded Frontier Mail for several nights so I decided to turn up next day and trust to luck to get myself taken on as 'assistant MO Train'. It was not possible to be in Calcutta for long without meeting someone you knew: in a club off Chowringhee I found Danny James playing billiards; we dined together at Firpo's restaurant and went to a film called 'This Happy Breed'. We talked about old times, of meeting at Mile 126 on the Tiddim road and about later times when we were both with 20th Indian Division; we talked of other AFS men, Din and Custer, Bill Schwab whom I had last seen at Darjeeling, and Parkhurst who had died somewhere of meningitis. The next night after a fast cab ride through Calcutta's dark streets I crossed Howrah bridge again and at the station pushed through the usual crowds to the Frontier Mail, to a coach labelled 'Train Hospital'. The MO train was an Irish doctor from Cork; we shared a knowledge of the mountains of Kerry, and before long I was in his comfortable 2-berth compartment and, as we both liked sailing as well as mountains, discussing the chances of buying a boat in India and sailing it home. The train stopped next morning long enough for us to have breakfast at a place called Gomoh Junction in a landscape of small scrub-covered hills. On the station platform were some striking-looking women, quite unlike any Indian women I had seen. They wore pleated skirts, big slippers and men's style shirts. Their figures were bold, and on their heads were gay kerchiefs; their eyes and features were like those of hawks; they had long black braided hair. After a stop for lunch at Gaya the train ambled through hilly, pretty country. It was cool because of the movement of the train. There were white clouds and a blue sky. In the evening we stopped for dinner at Allahabad.

At Aligarh the next afternoon I left the Frontier Mail and changed for Bareilly and Kathgodam. My train on the narrow gauge line was not due to leave for three hours. I found a first class compartment and settled down to wait. Aligarh was filthy; there were flies everywhere and crowds of beggar boys, one of whom was trying to sell his small sister, 'Look, Sahib, it's a girl, a little girl.' Gradually the compartment took on a look that made me think of scenes from Alice

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

Through the Looking-glass. Three young subalterns on leave came in, bound for Nainital. They were followed by a couple of minor characters, one of them a scruffy, garrulous Anglo-Indian in dirty khaki shirt and slacks; he had grey hair and a topi and must have been a low-grade official of some kind. One of the lieutenants and I went to the station restaurant for tea; when we got back the compartment was filling up; a police official had come in, and another Anglo-Indian, who was fast asleep in a corner. Next to him sat an Indian wearing dark glasses; he had a huge nose and bulbous lips and his mouth was always open. With him were two paunchy young men in spotless white, wearing white Congress caps. Finally, in came the big shot, the man for whom in some indefinable way we had now begun to feel that we were waiting, a gross, sweating man of perhaps forty-five with a bushy moustache; he was dressed in spotless white linen and white cap and was followed by an army of porters carrying trunks, hampers, a tiffin basket and a sporting gun. Finally, bringing up the tail of the little column came His Highness' (he could have been no less) personal servant bearing H.H.'s hookah, which had a two pint bowl and a four foot length of flexible tube leading to the mouthpiece. Meanwhile H.H. was chewing betel, one of the young Congressmen was down by the railway track doing nasal hygiene and the first Anglo-Indian was talking twenty-to-the-dozen to no one in particular and was getting very hoarse. He was having trouble with a window shutter. 'O these shutters. It is fucking nuisance.'

H.H.'s bearer, a thin elderly man with an aquiline nose, grey beard and turban, stood bolt upright at the open door heeding no one but his master. He seemed by his looks and carriage to be descended from generations of soldier servants.

At Bareilly, not long before midnight, we changed trains. The three subalterns and I dined at the station restaurant and enjoyed a bottle of John Haig before unrolling our bedding and going to sleep on the floor of the waiting room. At four in the morning a waiter woke me with eggs and fishcakes; it was abominably hot but the tea which came with the food was welcome. I shaved and had a shower; I then waited for an hour and a half until at dawn my train for the railhead at Kathgodam arrived.

There, at the edge of the foothills, I found a delightfully informal atmosphere. The Railway Transport Officer did not want to know about my movement order which I had lost with my wallet in Calcutta, and which was my only authority for being there. He found me a seat in the front of a three-ton lorry going to Ranikhet and soon we were climbing the 6,000 feet on a narrow winding road with a good surface. The way lay at first through open woods and later across bare hillsides where there was grass, and pine trees, and clear stony streams with blue pools and white waterfalls.

I settled in at Norton's Hotel and went for a stroll on a grassy ridge where I could lie under tall 'long-needled Himalayan pines' and look north to an unbroken skyline of the sacred snows, from the mountains of Badrinath, source of the Ganges, to Trisul and Nanda Devi, which was then the highest peak that anyone had climbed. The moon was almost full and before going to bed I had another glimpse of Trisul, high and white now above a layer of cloud. For the next two weeks I wandered freely in the foothills close to the big mountains, my walk taking me to the mysterious Rup Kund at the foot of Nanda Ghunti and Trisul.

To carry my kit and do the cooking I hired a wiry middle-aged man with grizzling hair and not much sense of humour. His name was Hari Datt. His dialect was a bit difficult to understand and I discovered later that unfortunately he was a Brahmin, unfortunately because his caste made our mutual relationship difficult: we could not sit together by his cooking fire when the day was cold, and if I fetched a vessel of water for making tea he threw it away rather than use it. I had a lot to learn.

After a night at Gwaldam Dak bungalow we crossed a suspension bridge over the Pindar river and followed a tributary of the Pindar to a settlement called Wan. The paths we followed each day climbed and fell thousands of feet as they do on every Himalayan trek. In the heat of the day we stopped in villages to rest, sitting before small shops or on verandahs in front of houses while boiling hot sweet milky tea was brought us. The tall brass mugs were too hot to hold in the hand except with the help of a piece of cloth.

The curiosity of the villagers was insatiable and friendly.

‘Salaam, Hazoor.’ And where was I going? How many children had I?

Was I married? What was my work? How much was I paid? Was the war finished? Surely I was working for Government?

The men squatted before me and passed a small earthenware pipe-bowl from hand to hand; it was stuffed with heavily sweetened tobacco kept alight with a glowing ember. The smoke was dragged in usually through the cupped hands, only rarely through the water bowl of a hookah. Conversation only stopped when we stood up to move on to the next village.

By the wayside there was always something to interest me, like the dung beetles in pairs rolling their ball of dung to some destination only they knew; the one in front walked backwards with its hind feet on the ground and its fore feet on the ball, the one behind also walked backwards but its hind feet were on the ball and its fore feet on the ground; for me the combined manoeuvre had an absorbing fascination; I could watch them for hours. Then there were all the birds that were new to me. There was a cuckoo with a call like that of the familiar cuckoo heard in Britain and another with a call consisting of four musical notes which are an indispensable part of the summer scene in Himalayan valleys, ‘Karpal pukka, karpal pukka’. Up, down, up, down. Orange Pekoe. ‘The Karpal berry is ripe’, so the bird gets its local name. The track, a stony footpath, was crossed at intervals by clear icy streams which tumbled down the hillsides in a succession of waterfalls. I was glad to take off all my clothes and dive into the cold water. By the streams, near villages, were flour mills, low hutches from which came the rumbling of grindstones driven by water wheels; these were fed from leats led off the main streams.

My progress was slow for not only was I far from fit but there was always something to look at or to ask about. At the end of one long pull uphill Hari Datt and I lay down for a rest by a shrine built under a tree from which hung three brass bells. Hari Datt jangled the bells and called out ‘Gobind, Gobind, Krishna’ and we lay down in the shade and let every limb droop. An old man joined us and also paused to rest. He was dressed differently from anyone I had seen. On his head was the usual little round Garwhali cap but on the upper part of his

body he wore a rough blanket fastened across the breast with two big iron pins the size of six inch nails, joined by a few links of chain. He squatted by the path and out came his earthenware pipe bowl. There were no matches where he came from and out of a fold of cloth he produced some quartz, a steel and a little bundle of tinder with which he soon had his tobacco lighted. I tried to get him to teach me how to strike sparks and light the tinder but with very indifferent success. His parting advice was,

‘Tez, Hazoor, tez; mat zor se.’ ‘Strike with speed, with speed; not with force.’

While he walked, uphill and down, he talked and, if he was not puffing or lighting his pipe, spun a coarse white thread on a spindle which dangled from his hand. He said the wool was brought from Tibet by Bhotias and I supposed it was yak hair.

At one village I met a Subedar-Major from VIIIth Army, home on leave, a hearty, cheerful fellow, small and dark and sturdy. As we talked I made some feeble joke and he clapped me on the shoulder and roared with laughter - one old campaigner to another, so to speak; but he really was an old campaigner. He had been five years overseas, in Eritrea, North Africa, Tunis, Sicily and Italy. And I knew that a Subedar-Major, like an RSM, was akin to God.

After a day during which we followed the rocky bed of a stream and crossed rickety wooden bridges in steady rain we reached Wan, a collection of low huts, and entered what Hari Datt said was the headman’s house. Everyone seemed to be there, a steamy mass of bulky blanket-clad men and boys and an assortment of girls and women. They were utterly different from the people of the last village down the valley. They blended with their surroundings and seemed completely at home in the rain and mist of the monsoon. Their clothes, their food and their huts were all made of the natural materials close at hand.

I was invited to sit on a new goats hair blanket and a tobacco pipe was passed round. They brought me tea made with whatever was left over after making butter. It was surprisingly good, and smelt and tasted like hot liquid cheese, more soup than tea.

By the time we reached Wan Hari Datt was finished; I knew that he would go no farther and I did not intend to try him. At heart he was a plainsman, 'I am maidan wala, Sahib,' he had wailed bitterly in many a steep place on the way to Wan; 'I am flat-place-fellow.' I began to look hopefully at the thighs and calves of the young blanket-clad goatherds and shepherds.

Hari Datt fell asleep on the floor and soon I was speaking English to a Jemadar in the forest service. His name was Nettar Singh and later, when I had advised him about his varicose veins, he gave me a great deal of help in arranging for Hari Datt to stay at Wan while a village boy called Batam Singh took his place. Batam Singh had a friendly, smiling and rather stupid face. He was as sturdily built as Hari Datt was spindly. He had magnificent thighs, rounded and smooth at rest but in action a solid mass of muscle. Like everyone else except the forester he went barefoot and his feet looked like an elephant's: they were square and stubby, and the skin was grey, wrinkled and very thick. Nearly everyone at Wan wore silver bracelets and some had earrings. The men dressed in thin trousers of some sort and wore the great blanket which I have already tried to describe, made of heavy homespun cloth folded back at the neck to form a broad collar which came round on each side of the neck as a wide lapel. The long iron pins were stuck one in each lapel and joined across the breast by a short cord or chain. Their black hair was rough and wild and on it they wore the small round Garwhali cap. In heavy rain the blanket could be adjusted over the head to form a cowl that gave the wearer a goblin look.

The name Singh was common - Daran Singh, Batam Singh, Nettar Singh and so on. Nettar Singh worked in the forests near Wan and lived part of the year at Bistoli, a grazing ground north of Wan, beyond the Wan pass. We agreed to meet there in a few days. The primitive forest bungalow at Wan was a little way above the village and I took Batam Singh and Hari Datt there with me. The hut was perched on half an acre of grassy lawn and was surrounded by majestic conifers, perhaps deodars - I did not know. Before us the jungle-covered slope dropped to a river valley; all around was wild steep hillside covered with forest. From the door I could see the

whole length of a mountain torrent, a white precipitous zig-zag of waterfall.

Batam Singh entered the hut followed by a wrinkled old man carrying dried cow dung and slivers of spruce to start a fire. Batam Singh had a blaze going in no time and, squatting by it, produced a pipe bowl carved out of some soft stone; he begged some of my tobacco. He was 16 years old, he said, and was fed up with his own country. Could he join the Army? After a time he settled down to his own affairs, producing a needle from a needle-case made of a porcupine quill. His only possessions seemed to be the sewing gear, the pipe bowl and the flint, steel and tinder that he used for fire-lighting.

Hari Datt had announced at Wan that he wanted to stay there and go no farther, saying 'It is dangerous; there are wild animals everywhere, Sahib, Jangali janvar.' The hut had only one room, I slept against one wall, Batam Singh and Hari Datt under one blanket against the other. Grunts and sighs from their side of the room soon suggested that one of them at least was having a disturbed night. The morning discovered a defect in Hari Datt associated with his being a Brahmin. He got into a terrible state because I approached the fire while he was cooking. It was cold in the hut so I just sat down where I was, reasoning that after all if I had spoilt his food the damage was done and I might as well keep warm while he finished cooking what was intended to be mine.

The older men at Wan looked like cheerful, wizened gnomes. They appeared from nowhere and showed great interest in my belongings. One came on our first night at the bungalow and stood silent a long time, a very old man with feet so leathery and wrinkled that they did not look human. Suddenly, hearing something outside, he hopped to the door and stood on one leg, his body bent forward, listening, his head turning quickly from side to side. The weather was bad and I took the day off, going in the afternoon for a walk along a cliffside path until a break in the mist showed me the ridges of a mountain called on the map 'Jatropani'. The treeline was at about 11,000 feet, perhaps 3,000 feet above where I then stood, and I hoped at last to get out onto high open hillside where the going and the views would be unobstructed.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

On my return to the hut I saw what looked like a pine marten crossing the meadow before the door. Its head was black, its shoulders red brown and its tail black. It was about two feet six inches long and had a galloping kind of movement in the long wet grass. Hari Datt's name for it was 'Chutrol'.

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On the 30th July we left Hari Datt to amuse himself at Wan while I went higher. I need not have worried about his looking after himself for Batam Singh told me later that he was offering 30 rupees for a Wan woman and it was obvious that he would be entertained in my absence. Batam Singh clearly despised him and told me that Brahmin or not I ought to take a stick to his backside. He also explained that the name Datt signified a Brahmin whereas the name Singh indicated the Chettri, or what was once the warrior, caste. The lowest caste of all were Lohar; a word which brought back some memory of mine that it meant 'a smith'. The clouds came down again, and we climbed steeply through dense jungle. We passed through a belt of bamboo at about 9,000 feet and he pointed out the young edible shoots. We stopped often to smoke or to pick wild strawberries. A drizzling rain continued and visibility was restricted to fifty yards. At about 12,000 feet, above a belt of rhododendron, we came out of the cloud and followed a stony path along a grassy ridge, the Wan pass; we flushed a number of large birds that I thought were probably Monal pheasants. We went north until the path suddenly turned west and ran steeply down to a clearing that Batam Singh said was Bistoli. There were half a dozen low huts with roofs of bamboo thatch. Rather mangy-looking pine trees hung with moss and fern surrounded the clearing but there was no view, and we went into one of the huts and made ourselves at home. There was not much that I could teach Batam Singh about fire lighting but I was surprised to find that he had no notion of using birch bark as kindling when everything was wet. His uses for birch bark were as writing paper and for weaving into bamboo matting to make a waterproof covering for the head and shoulders.

Nettar Singh appeared next morning and out of a lump of clay made me a relief map of the district to show me where we were. That evening the cloud cleared patchily and two huge rock and ice peaks suddenly reared above the mists, Nanda Ghunti (20,000 ft.) and Trisul

(23,000 ft.), directly before me. Nearer than either, and joined to us by a long bare ridge, was a black conical peak of about 17,000 feet which Batam Singh called Kala wala, the black one. The matter of what to do was settled by the arrival of Nettar Singh who, after some talk and a cup of tea over the embers of my fire, promised that if I would wait another day he would himself go with me in the direction of the black peak and see how far we could get.

I sat at the door of the hut looking first at the pines, the mossy stones and the steaming jungle, and then lifting my eyes to the crystalline grey rock and bright snow of Trisul and Nanda Ghunti. They looked very near, very cold - hard and beautiful against the pale blue cloudless sky. I turned to look at my companions' faces, the rich brown skin, high cheekbones, full mouths, deepset eyes and tangled black hair; the picture of mountains and men was completed by the white teeth that showed when they grinned, by their greasy little round grey caps and the rough blankets over their shoulders. Ragged types perhaps, but good company, able to carry a load and laugh at discomfort. They were quite different in appearance from Sherpas or Gurkhas; some had slightly Semitic profiles and wore bangles on their wrists. Their dark faces contrasted vividly with the white of the snows.

I had found that as I got fitter I felt no less tired at a halt or at the end of the day but after a rest was soon ready for more instead of continuing to feel completely exhausted. We spent the day idling about the huts until Nettar Singh returned; Batam Singh told me about his own affairs. He had learnt his lesson about birch bark, for he tore a piece out of a birch and bamboo rain hood that someone had left in the hut and used it to start our morning fire. He complained that he had a fever and I hoped that he would be recovered by next day. Round his neck he wore a string with two little cloth bags hanging from it, each one an inch square; in them were charms to keep away sickness; before eating he touched them and murmured to himself. I asked about marriage and he told me that he paid 500 Rupees for his wife. She was 16 years old; they were married that year and had no children. He said that the usual age for marriage was 8, 12 or 16. The wife then lived in her husband's house but they slept apart until she was aged 18 or so. From 20 onwards they had children. Men had one, two or three

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

wives depending on their wealth. In mourning they removed bangles and earrings for two or three years - Batam Singh, for example, now wore no ornaments because his mother had lately died. On a death the Brahmins took a levy: it might be a cow, blankets or money. A widow had to leave her husband's village unless she had children. If he himself died now any other man might have his wife without purchase.

We went for a short walk and when there was a break in the mists lay in the grass on a saddle. Batam Singh smoked but my tobacco was finished and I did not care for his. I was looking at a picture, the great snow and rock peak Nanda Ghunti framed in cloud, towering close at hand. I was in a timeless fairyland, the land beyond the ranges, where only the shepherds came, a place to which I could always come back. I never did go back.

Returning in mist, running through the grasses, we came on a goatherd with his flock. He stood motionless, knee-deep in wet grass, not seeing us, the rain dripping steadily on his blanket hood. We raised hands in greeting and sat down 30-yards apart in a triangle, his flock in the middle. After a while we moved to sit close together and the goatherd's pipe circulated; I learnt to hold it in my hands as they did, without my lips touching the bowl. There was a magic about the chance meeting, the immediate silent fellowship, the mist closing about us, isolating us.

Batam Singh was developing a bad cold which was troublesome. He did not want to come next day and he did not want to stay behind. Nettar Singh arrived in the evening and said that he would bring his man with him when we went up tomorrow; his man could take Batam Singh's place if necessary. Batam Singh's mental age was very low; he had no steadiness and changed from moment to moment. He was easily elated and depressed. When he settled at night in his bed of straw, he circled like some animal and spat in every direction; his repetitive questioning was childlike - 'Are we going tomorrow? How long for? How much are you paying Hari Datt?' and so on and so on. Crouching in the firelight he was a naked young savage wearing a cap, a loincloth and round his neck a bit of magic string.

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1st August. I was making chapattis for breakfast when an old man, a chance visitor, accosted me, and began the usual cross-examination: 'Sahib, why do you eat chapattis?' And why did I not bring bread and biscuits? And where was my luggage? No, not that sack; proper luggage?

There was some delay while Nettar Singh paid his forestry workers, and we set off east along a precipitous jungle track that brought us to the crest of a ridge above the tree-line. The highest trees were rhododendron; above them was only coarse upland grass varied with clumps of flowers and intrusions of rock. The ridge was sharp and fell steeply on either side. The morning had dawned fine and Nettar Singh said it would remain so and that by evening we should reach a place called Gimtoli. We halted on a col at between 13,000 and 14,000 feet to eat baked potato and raisins. On our left, filling the horizon, was the south side of Nanda Ghunti only five miles away and in front was the summit of Trisul no farther off but towering 8,000 ft above us. When we looked south towards the plains we saw below us long banks of grey and white cloud.

Nettar Singh showed me many kinds of flowering plants and a species of wild rhubarb which I tasted and found extremely sour. Small gentians were common, and we saw a flock of choughs and many Monal pheasants; in flight the Monal looked like grouse but were larger; the cock had a beautiful sheen on its metallic-blue head and a white patch on its back, the hen was dowdier, a brown colour. I was tempted near the col to drink from a lovely spring of clear icy water, one of a number which spouted from the short turf in curves of enchanting silver. I plunged my face into one of these spouts to quench my fierce thirst and gulped down a mouthful, forgetting that I was desperately short of breath: unable to stifle the urge to breathe in, I choked and, feeling like death, gasped and coughed till I could breathe freely again.

After climbing another thousand feet we turned left off the ridge and went easily down sloping pastures to a shepherds' grass-roofed hut, Gimtoli, where the shepherds gave us tea. The stream below was the Rup Nala and our side of it, the left bank, was an easy slope. The far side of the stream was precipitous, sometimes sheer rock and

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

sometimes very steep grass. Beyond, against blue sky, I could see the summit of Nanda Ghunti.

Rain began to fall at dusk and Batam Singh and I went down to a cave near the stream while Nettare Singh and his man stayed with the shepherds. With great difficulty Batam Singh, feverish and coughing, got a fire going with his flint and steel and some dried grass which he carried inside his blanket. Everything around us except in a small area under the overhang of the cave was soaking wet, but soon we were snug, the flames flickered against the rock over our heads and outside the cave stars began to show. Batam Singh was shivering and quite miserable and I passed him my battle dress blouse for warmth. A drizzle of rain began once more and I woke to a chill dawn; I lay in my sleeping bag watching the mist and drizzle outside our small rocky overhang until Nettare Singh sent down an urchin with some chapatis, curried potatoes and lukewarm greasy soup of which we were glad. Then he himself appeared with his man and announced that the day would turn out fine, so I forded the stream and joined them. Batam Singh was not fit to start and we left him with the shepherds.

After going up the stream a little way we crossed to the right bank of the Rup nala and followed that, having to climb steep grass with a rocky cliff below. As we rose higher the grass became alarmingly steep, falling away under us to the edge of a cliff that plunged vertically into what was now a gorge. The precipice of steep tussocky grass that thoroughly frightened me seemed not to affect Nettare Singh. He had removed his shoes, presumably so that they would not be damaged by the wet, and was carrying them in his left hand while in his right hand he held an open umbrella to protect his rather smart jacket from the rain. I felt very much at a disadvantage in badly nailed boots. To my relief the slope soon eased and we climbed through fields of wild rhubarb as sour as that lower down. The ground at first was rich in flowers but as we got higher earth gave way to scree and higher still we climbed over long stretches of snow and ice. The going was steep again and I struggled along, panting, while Nettare Singh and his companion made nothing of the slope or of the height. I trailed at least fifty yards behind and hated them both.

At last we reached the crest of a ridge which looked like an old moraine. Three hundred feet above us I could see through mist

another and more pronounced ridge which ran parallel to the one on which we stood. Between the two ridges, in a basin whose sides were entirely of snow and ice, was enclosed a green lake, Rup kund. Nettar Singh went down to the lake's edge and beckoned me to follow. We went round the edge to where I could see the debris of a big fall of rock and he pointed to some human bones. The lake was partly frozen and on looking among the wreckage I found about a dozen skulls, broken thigh bones, bits of spine and other fragments. Among them was an old boot sole and Nettar Singh said that when he had been there about a year ago he had found a pair of trousers. He said that under the snow and ice were the remains of many more bodies, 5,000 he said. I had never before heard him make an extravagant remark of that sort. I found lengths of tangled black hair, Indian, I thought. Nettar Singh thought that there were remains of white men too but had no evidence of this. He said that nothing was known locally about the tragedy.

Rupkund was at about 16,000 feet, perhaps very slightly lower. Nettar Singh asked me what I wished to do. He said when I questioned him that the route to the main ridge 300 ft higher was 'very bad'. From there in clear weather we should have had a view down to the Silisamuder glacier and across that to the west face of Trisul, where according to Nettar Singh there was a shrine in a cave. The extra few hundred feet would be to no purpose in thick weather; it would take me hours, and Nettar Singh did not want to go on any more than I did. Sleet was falling and the mist had closed about us. We were getting cold and had no wish to linger in that rather gruesome spot.

I wished afterwards that I had brought away a piece of skull and indeed Nettar Singh suggested later that some bones should have been taken for investigation. However, the skull bones were broken and decayed, and I had not then heard about carbon dating. Others have been to Rup Kund since my visit; the bones have been dated and the age estimated at a few hundred years - (circa 1400 AD) - but no one has solved the riddle of who those people were and how they died. What is known for certain is that pilgrims sometimes travel that way to the shrine under Trisul; it is more than likely that a caravan of ill-clad pilgrims was once caught there by storm and died of cold.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

On the way down we avoided the climb across vertical grass that we had used on the way up and reached Gimtoli by late afternoon. The shepherds brought me tea outside; for some reason which I did not understand they seemed reluctant to invite me in. However, when I got so cold that my teeth were chattering I pushed at the door and told Nettar Singh that I wanted to go on down. Instead I was invited inside and we sat smoking by their fire and had a long conversation about the marriage and divorce customs of the English, about which they were curious. I had been chary of pushing into their shelter as I knew nothing of their customs and had wondered if someone of low caste like me might not be unwelcome.

When the four of us started down we took a completely different route from that of the ascent from Bistoli. We came down steep grass, then through scrub that was full of ferns and boulders, and lower still through dense bamboo called ringal. We lost the path many times before we reached a small clearing where the river disappeared into a steep gorge; we sat down to rest and eat delicious wild raspberries. We crossed to the left bank of the river by a bridge of stones and planks and again lost the path; for two hours we toiled through dense ringal up a slope inclined at 40 to 50 degrees. I thought we should be there for the night but at dark we came out above the ringal and found the track again. Nettar Singh's man went first, then Nettar Singh, Batam Singh and then me. Two of us carried bundles of split bamboo and at a little hut before we entered thick jungle again we shouted for fire. A man came out and lighted the bamboos as flares, and we went on up the narrow track, the flares lighting the trees and cliffs on either side.

I was very tired when we got in to Bistoli. We lit a fire, baked potatoes in it, drank a lot of tea and went to sleep.

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In the morning the sun streamed into the hut, and when I opened the door the sky was bright blue and perfectly clear except for a few small white clouds. Nanda Ghunti and Trisul were distinct and the rocks of Nanda Ghunti looked iron grey like the broken surface of cast iron. Nettar Singh came to point out four peaks in the north; he said that they were near Kamet. From a compass bearing I thought they

must be the Badrinath peaks. Soon cloud came up and dense mist again hid everything. We settled to a day in the hut baking potatoes while I thought over the lessons of the holiday. Not many more days of my leave were left and I had a feeling that my time in India too was drawing to an end; I wanted to collect my ideas about proper expeditions and big mountains. I had seen beautiful country but for me it was the end of solitary haphazard treks. To do more needed more time, congenial company, a minimum of equipment and some porters with a capable man in charge.

When I looked south after the clouds had cleared at evening I could see every sort of colour: dark green deciduous trees, darker pines, light red and green patches of cultivation, grass, brown rocks and the blue haze of far distance. The clouds lingered in wisps and patches over the lower hills. I could hear the roar of streams below and the 'drip, drip' of water off wet leaves. The sharp ridge above Bistoli was one of my happiest memories, coming and going. It was the last link between low inhabited valleys of pine, jungle and cultivation and the high secret valleys of pasture, rock and snow. Batam Singh and I started down on the 4th August and found Hari Datt at Wan looking quite chirpy though moaning a bit about rain and other troubles; four days later I was back at Ranikhet; the 9th August was the last day of my leave.

After we left Gwaldam bungalow Hari Datt began to smell home and was almost cheerful. He started before me, muttering to himself, 'Jaldi Garoor' (his own village), 'Garoor soon.' I lay in bed surrounded by mist, quiet lawns under the pines and the sounds of cattle, hoping that if I waited the sun might come out. Not far from Gwaldam the path ran through a narrow defile. The clouds had cleared and I turned to have one more look at Trisul and the spectacular ridge that ran east from it. I hated turning south into the lower hills that led to the plains, leaving the sparse hardy population of the hills and going towards the teeming multitudes below. I was in a valley of small hummocks, pleasant brooks and terracing on which here and there were cottages of white-washed stone with tiled roofs. The Baijnath bungalow was removed and quiet. I could hear the wind in the pines. There was shade, and the slow sounds of summer came up from the valleys below. The day was sultry with clouds on the

horizon and a slight haze in the valley. Towards evening the wind rose and it looked like rain. I lit a fire.

A strong blow with torrential rain came from the west and in the middle of it a lady walked in with a Gurkha officer; both were soaked to the skin. He introduced her as Barbara and said that his name was Jack Masters. Their coolies were a long way behind and we sat by my fire and drank pints of sweet tea, all I could offer; luckily it was what they most wanted then. When the storm had cleared and their coolies arrived they invited me to a dinner which began with a cocktail of brandy, egg and milk, and continued at the same high level. They were going to Wan and Badrinath and I was able to show them sketches of the country about Wan. I knew slightly one or two people known to Masters; one he referred to as Bow-wow (Colonel Borrowman) and another as Roddy (Brigadier Rodham) and we found at the bungalow a Jeffery Ffarnol novel inscribed by 'Roddy' and given to the bungalow library in 1936 when 'Roddy' was a Captain. I enjoyed the evening and forgot the meeting until 20 years later when I happened to read 'The Road Past Mandalay' by John Masters and saw from the text that he had been my host that night.

The hotel at Ranikhet was managed by an Englishwoman, Mrs Issler, whose husband, a Polish doctor, was in Burma with 19th Casualty Clearing Station. She told me that during the war India had grown far less snobbish. When they first settled in India the Isslers had not had enough money to buy even a house and it was useless, she said, to expect patients unless one had a good motor car in which to call on them. So first they bought a car, then the patients came, and the money, and at last the house. She told me of a Mrs Browne who lived at Bothwell Bank, Ranikhet. She would be interested to hear where I had been, said Mrs Issler, so I spoke by telephone to Mrs Browne and accepted an invitation to tea. On the way I lay under the pines on the ridge above the hotel; we had heard on the wireless that morning that a new kind of bomb had been dropped on Japan and that Russia had seized the moment to declare war. I dreamt of another year and of what I should like to do if I came back to Garhwal.

I thought about the past year. In one of my books I had come across a poem in which someone wrote that 'this death in the field' was 'a fine free setting forth'. What drivel, I thought. Violent death

never seemed fine to me. It made all mean, and lay bare, without pity. I hated it. To pretend that it was fine was like a child's clutching some toy for comfort in the face of what was big, unknown and frightening. The men I had known either met it because it was inevitable or chose to face it because to them even death was better than life without manhood.

Mrs Browne was an elderly woman with abundant snowy hair and a soft pink and white skin. She was interested to hear about Rup Kund, and told me about some of her own journeys in the Himalaya. She had been all over the place. We sat out on her lawn in the warm evening sun, enjoying the stirring of a cool breeze and drinking the best tea poured from a silver teapot into delicate china cups. She was local secretary of the Himalayan Club and suggested that I should join. It was not long since she had been visited by Wilfred Noyce, who was running a mountain Centre for Aircrew in Kashmir.

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Two days later, at Lucknow, I collected my old tin trunk from the Bank. I found old letters, diaries, paints and pastels, tins of tobacco, my service dress and greatcoat neatly folded and, covered with mould, a pair of what had been smartly polished brown shoes. By the time I reached Calcutta the second atomic bomb had been dropped and there were rumours that Japan had capitulated. Calcutta was in uproar. As I sipped my drink in the foyer of The Grand a party of sailors came shouting up the wide front steps; they led a horse and ghari to the bar for a pint which they forced down the animal's throat. The sailors were more minded than anyone to celebrate and that night at a film show they marched across the front of the auditorium singing 'Rule Britannia'.

Bill Haden from 111 Anti/Tank Regiment was at The Grand, on his way home for 'demob', and we started to talk about plans for after the army. I had a living to earn, but no dependants; in as far as I thought at all about the future I thought that a specialist training in surgery would be the obvious thing for me to go for, especially as I liked working with my hands. Bill too had a living to earn and was going back to being a schoolmaster: he was determined to make use in his work of the experiences of the last four years; he did not want to

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

return to being one of a narrow clique. He asked me how I had spent my leave and I told him all about it, recalling my contentment with the shepherds of Nanda Ghunti.

I told him that while I might like to go back with friends to climb a particular mountain, what I really wanted was to spend years in a country like Garwhal, but less known. He asked a lot of questions and in the end said 'What a waste it would be to go back and settle in some suburban street'.

I found it hard to put my hopes into words. I knew more or less what I wanted but the ideas seemed wild. I wanted to find some blank on a mountain map and fill it in. There could not be many blanks left, they were likely to be politically inaccessible, and I did not know any of the right people. It would be some time before I was out of the army and I thought I had better use the time making inquiries. Could I approach the Royal Geographical Society? I thought my ADMS would help there and later he did. As I was in Calcutta I visited the Government Map Depot and talked to a major in the Survey of India. I wonder now how many young men came to bother him at that time with questions like mine. He was very helpful and explained that much of the Himalaya was still unexplored, especially to the east in the direction of Bhutan and Yunnan, an inhospitable region full of unrest, where the opium poppy grew, and the stranger was unwelcome. I confirmed much of this in the next year, during which I pursued officials in the civil administration at Singapore and was given up-to-date and highly discouraging advice.

Bill and I cast back to our time together on the Irrawaddy bridgehead. He told me that what gave him equanimity in battle was a feeling that all mankind shared something eternal, of which they are made aware by danger, or by beauty or by any great aim in common. I accused him of being hopelessly vague, and reminded him that he had once told me that only an acceptance that death was certain had helped him. But I did not really think that one could reason about those things. Some men just were more placid under strain than others; Bill was one of them.

The final news of the Jap surrender came on the 15th August. The speech of surrender on behalf of Japan was relayed to us. The words

did not sound to us like those of a people that has been thoroughly beaten and is surrendering unconditionally. We felt as we listened that if Japan got away with supposing that they had reached some sort of accommodation with us then half our effort was thrown away. We did not like it.

Four days later I was in a lift at The Grand when a tall, athletic-looking man with a colonel's red tabs squeezed in by me. He was somehow familiar and we recognised each other at the same moment; it was John Wakeford. We clasped hands and he said something absurd like 'Fancy meeting you in a lift' and we arranged to meet next morning. I was very happy to see him again. I never had another CO I so much liked.

In the morning we had coffee together. He was still using a cigarette holder and tapping his cigarettes on a silver case before lighting them. We talked for a long time about the past and the future. He suggested that I might later feel like going to live in Rhodesia and told me to think over the possibility of a job with the mining company for which he worked; it was, he said, a big, rich company which ran its own hospitals and had its own medical services for employees. I told him my vague plans and he said that I should consider the offer of a surgical job with him after I had taken the Fellowship.

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A few minutes after we parted a voice on the hotel Tannoy announced that MOs and nurses bound for Rangoon could go that day by sea, and before six o'clock in the evening I was aboard ship.



Chapter 21 Saigon

(August-December 1945)

When the two atom bombs had been dropped and notice of capitulation had come from Tokyo some of us thought that all was now over and that we could go home. We soon found that we were mistaken. For one thing the Japs did not seem to understand the terms of surrender and tried to treat ‘unconditional surrender’ as a sort of honourable truce; in the vast area of Asia to the east and south of Burma the Japs were under arms; and in Indo-China, Malaya and elsewhere thousands of British, Indian, French, Dutch and American POWs languished under atrocious conditions, many of them at the point of death. Those countries were infested also with Nationalists and Communists who had seen in the dispossession of the Colonial powers by the Japanese and in the subsequent defeat of the Japanese a unique chance to seize power themselves. The prisoners of war had to be rescued, the Japanese had to be disarmed and sent home, and someone had to keep law and order while decisions were made about the future of the old colonies. The 20th Indian Division had been earmarked, though we did not know it, to take part after the fall of Burma in ‘Operation Zipper’, the invasion of Malaya; now we were called instead to occupy the southern part of French Indo-China, once known as Cochin-China and centred on Saigon. By mid-September General Gracey and advance elements of the Division had already flown to French Indo-China by way of Bangkok. The rest of us followed in more leisurely fashion by sea.

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The dark and in the end disastrous story of French rule in Indo-China began at the end of the eighteenth century and continued into

the twentieth. Indo-China was once regarded by France as her proudest colonial possession and included within its boundaries what were then known as Tonkin, Annam, Cochin China and Cambodia, as well as a part of Laos.

After the fall of France in 1940 the French colonial government, sympathetic to Vichy, was cut off from Europe and did not seriously resist when the Japanese entered Hanoi. The Japs gradually moved south and set up their 'Supreme Headquarters, South-East Asia' at Saigon, under Count Terauchi. It was from there that they directed the war in Malaya, Burma and the East Indies. Although there were pockets of resistance to the Japanese among Frenchmen up and down Indo-China a state of 'live and let live' existed in Saigon until March 1945. Then, when the Japanese faced defeat in Burma, an Allied invasion of Indo-China from the west through Thailand became a possibility; the Japanese could not afford to have remnants of a western colonial power impeding defence against such invasion, and many of the French were imprisoned, killed or driven into southern China.

Long before the Japanese were established in Hanoi or Saigon there had been two other movements afoot in Indo-China: Nationalism and Communism. The communist movement was inspired by Ho Chi Min who at that time had American support, in particular the support of the OSS Roosevelt was unsympathetic to the colonial enterprises of the western powers and had no wish to see France re-established in Indo-China. Ho Chi Min, a man of outstanding ability as a political manoeuvre, was in the confidence of the Americans and established throughout the country a network of communist cells. As late as 1945 there were still pockets of French resistance in remote places, beset by the Japanese and trying desperately to hold out, in need of food and ammunition; the Americans gave them no help, a bizarre state of affairs in view of the later American involvement in Indo-China.

While we waited in Rangoon for MacArthur's formal acceptance of Japanese surrender, Ho's communist Annamites gained power in Saigon, and when we arrived the city was a mess of warring factions: Vichy French, French who had been trying to organise resistance to the Japanese, armed and disciplined Japanese, other Japanese who thought that by going over to the Communists they might benefit

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

themselves in some way, genuinely and innocently nationalist Annamites and lastly the communist Annamites under Ho, destined after many years of war to oust the French and Americans and take over what was left of the country, giving their leader's name - 'Ho Chi Min City' - to Saigon .

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At the end of September the Regiment, with Indian and Gurkha troops of the Division, boarded a comfortable old passenger boat of the B & I Steam Navigation Company, the *Rajuna*. As we steamed out of Rangoon I saw the *Ranchi* anchored in the river; the hole in her side had been patched and the sight of her reminded me of our dismal time in Egypt. Life on the *Rajuna* was like being on a pleasure cruise. We idled about the deck waiting for the next meal, talked, basked in the sun, and got to know some nurses who were going our way. On the 4th October we passed Singapore; the buildings along the sea front were tall and white, the sea was clear and green and the only disturbance on the mirror-like surface was made by flying fish that came out to skim the water for fifty yards on either bow. A few hours later we were heading north into the South China Sea and a small ripple disturbed the calm. The sea was a darker blue and there was a scattering of white horses. Merely to be free from regimental duties was a contentment and we did not bother with ship-board games or occupy our evenings dancing.

Dizzy Dale came to me one day and said that I ought to go in for psychology. I asked him 'Why' and he said, 'Well, you've got a reputation for summing people up. Pete Furlonger was saying that he'd been to see you the other day and felt as if you were looking right through him and knew exactly what he was thinking.' I had heard other people say the same thing; there must have been some kind of special look that came on my face when my mind was an absolute blank; whatever the cause, it could be very useful.

During intervals between meals Charlie Armour and I chatted up the ship's officers and were given lessons in the use of the sextant. I tried to interest him in the eastern Himalayas but he told me that when he went home he must think of a career and perhaps get married. When he asked for advice about marrying I could only reflect that I

was a very unsuitable person to give it. All I could do was to outline the likely consequences and he remarked obscurely,

‘Ah yes, it is better to be bold than always to be sorry.’

Now and then, remembering my leave, visions returned to me of the white ice and grey rock of Nanda Ghunti and Trisul against blue sky, framed in a wooden window and balanced by brown faces with slanting eyes and shaggy hair. I wrote letters to the Survey of India about the eastern Himalaya, and wondered if I could get three months’ leave there before going home. At the same time I questioned a surgeon who happened to be on the ship about how long it would take to work for the Fellowship examination of the Royal College of Surgeons. I decided that by the time I was 32 I might with luck be a Fellow of the College and also have behind me some experience of mountain exploration.

Arrival at Saigon was marked by a sudden change from the dreamlike atmosphere of a cruise to the realities of life on land. We disembarked and marched through the town past groups of Annamites, Chinese, Japanese and French; there was a desultory cheer and someone clapped half-heartedly.

The situation at Saigon was confused. The Division was expected to repatriate prisoners of war, disarm the Japanese and maintain law and order until the French should return in sufficient force to take over the country. This they were not expected to do before late November or early December and we were in the awkward position of maintaining western colonial rule over a nationalist native population with troops who were themselves Asiatics and who were either self governing like the Gurkhas or, like the Indians, had been promised self-rule in the near future. The disarming of the Japanese was postponed and under our orders they shared in the protection of Saigon. Most of them helped us but there were those who still refused to recognise the surrender of Japan and joined the Annamites (Vietmin). The sphere of influence of the Division was limited to Saigon city and a small area near it. Had this not been so the job would have been impossible.

We settled down to two and a half months of cantonment life interrupted by occasional outings to train the gunners or to give

artillery support to Allied troops. Saigon seemed civilised; the houses on each side of the wide avenues were well built and there were no filthy bazaars in the main streets, which were lined with trees and were shady, breezy and cool; the contrast with Rangoon delighted us. Our quarters were in the large colonial artillery barracks by the racecourse. It was a splendid building, spacious and shady with thick walls and wide verandahs. The lawns inside were shaded by trees and the rooms were as cool as they could be in those days before air-conditioning. Armed Japanese were to be seen everywhere about the town and we ourselves when we went abroad went armed and never alone. We ate our dinner on the first night by lamplight because the Saigon power station had been put out of action by saboteurs; from then on, the Regiment's own generators were rigged up to light the barracks. After dinner short bursts of rifle, Sten gun and LMG fire often reminded us of nights in Burma, and some wished that those times were not over. I had visited the Field Ambulance and seen the body of one of our young officers, and I did not feel as they did. During that first night I was called to see a sick Sergeant-major and noticed that on the outskirts of the city the sporadic small arms fire went on all night. I was up until sunrise; the air at dawn was cool in the shade of our big barrack building.

I slept in a bungalow outside the gates. From my bed I could see the sun rise over the huge Saigon racecourse. In front of the bungalow was a well-kept garden full of bougainvillea and some yellow and red flowering shrubs whose names I did not know. I shared the place with Charlie Armour, Richard Crookes the Padre and Sidney Woodruffe who had once been a policeman in Southampton. It was cool in October and I slept with a sheet over me. I shaved on the verandah in the morning sun and had breakfast in the next house with other officers from RHQ. Then I would walk over the road to the main barracks where I had quarters fitted out as MI room, Sick Bay, Storeroom and accommodation for the medical staff.

Bombardier Lang had gone back home and been replaced by Bdr Cooke, a tall Londoner with a long gloomy face and a passion for breeding and racing greyhounds. He had once been a porter at Guy's Hospital and was good at any kind of practical work, planning our accommodation and setting out my furniture and instruments. L/Bdr

Riley was a quick, rather temperamental Irishman with black hair and blue eyes, and my new batman Parsons was a short stocky man with curly brown hair and a face badly scarred by old acne; he had a friendly expression and pleasant smile. For cleaning and general donkey-work we had a Korean prisoner, a big flat-faced rather unpleasant-looking brute whom Cooke treated with good humoured astonishment,

‘Cor, yer are a ’orrible little bugger, aren’t yer. Aren’t yer a ’orrible little bugger, eh? ‘Ere, ’ave a fag’.

My morning sick parade lasted about an hour. Then I did a sick parade for the Korean prisoners who worked for the regiment. They were a sullen, dull crowd, vicious-looking, short, and powerfully built, with yellow skins and black hair. During the rest of the morning I saw patients for whom I needed more time than I had at sick parade, I attended to records, brought inoculations up to date and sometimes visited the Field Ambulance.

After lunch I might go into town, driving a jeep and being confused at first by the small roundabouts and the anti-clockwise circulation of traffic. It was delightful to hear the voices of well-turned out women speaking French and to find the shops amazingly stocked with goods of quality. In the shops my schoolboy French was not much use but knowing that we were ‘abroad’ I would often by instinct break into Hindustani or Welsh, both equally embarrassing and in Saigon equally useless. My afternoons lasted until about 17.30 after which I had a bath and change, then casual conversation until the evening meal at 1900. We would then read or write in our quarters or go into the town for entertainment: films or concerts. During this time the pianist Solomon came to Saigon and I went to hear him every night he was there. On the last night he played Bach Preludes and Fugues, a Haydn Sonata and some Beethoven - an enchanting break in the pattern of our lives.

One October day I found a tortoiseshell-coloured moth with a wingspan of 9½ ins.; parts of the wings an inch square were transparent like sheets of glass or mica. I took a lot of time to make a sketch of it. Before the end of the month Charlie Armour heard that he had been accepted at Cambridge and was to go home to be

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

released. I was kept busy with routine jobs as MO to the regiment and was not doing much to fit myself for a life of exploration: I began to feel that my life at Saigon was a dead end; one Saturday I took the morning off and after stretching drawing paper on a board made a plane table survey of Saigon racecourse. All the necessary instruments were available in the Regiment and the result, though on a small scale, was accurate and raised my spirits. I planned with my usual optimism to take leave at home in '46/47 and return to India to take my discharge there, perhaps in '47. I would visit south west China, and go there again perhaps in '48/49. While in Burma I had saved about £600; it was in a Bombay bank and I felt that I had all the money I should ever want in the world.

About that time I heard a rumour that an expedition to Mount Everest was being planned. I felt far away and out of touch but wondered if I could get on it as the doctor. My only qualification was experience as an RMO and some knowledge of Urdu. My mountaineering ability would be surpassed by others. I wondered if it was worth applying to join, but did nothing about it.

A Frenchman found me a Chinese teacher, Mr Wong, 225, Rue Lefèvre. He was a shopkeeper cum schoolmaster, a small man who came every afternoon on a bicycle. He had spectacles, a scrubby, unshaven chin, open-necked shirt, and rather sparse hair. He was frightened all the time because the Annamites sometimes murdered Chinese who associated with Europeans. He came secretly for an hour a day and I paid him well, but I was never sure that he would pluck up the courage to come again. I liked him and we were very much at ease together; I hoped that he would survive to continue my lessons. When he had been coming for some time we started playing chess - Chinese style. He taught me that you played on the lines, not in the squares; and the moves and the names of the pieces were different from those I knew. The King and Queen were the Emperor and Prime Minister, the moves of the Emperor were restricted to his Palace grounds, and so on. I made little progress, either with chess or the language, though I wrote everything down. One night we played Mahjong so late that he stayed because it was dangerous for him to be abroad after curfew. I put up a bed next to mine and he retired, murmuring Chinese phrases, one of which he said came from Genghiz Khan; it sounded like,

‘Chen li: ru jum yeng’ - ‘A thousand miles: no human smoke.’

I liked the idea.

The Japs in Saigon had not at this time been disarmed and their officers and NCOs carried swords. They jumped to attention, bowed and saluted us punctiliously and obeyed orders. We had many of them scurrying around the Barracks mending electric lights and so on, but their chief function was to give support in keeping order outside Saigon.

We were out of sympathy with the French who had gunboats, tanks and modern arms; the Annamites had spears, bows and arrows, and rifles: not much else. One of our officers who had been out with a 25-pounder in support of a French unit said that when the French attacked a village they approached the first hut and fired through the walls with an LMG. After spraying the hut they opened the door and emptied another magazine through it. They dared then to enter and if the inhabitants happened to be Chinese instead of Annamite they said ‘Excusez’ and went on to the next hut.

There was a Civilian Hospital where I sometimes sent men for treatment. It was near the French Police Station and the gunners begged me to return them to the Regiment so that they could sleep in barracks; they said that at the hospital they were kept awake at night by the screams of Annamites undergoing interrogation. But the Annamites too had a bad reputation; they could be cruel, primitive and vindictive - it was just that we had expected the French to behave like a civilised people.

Saigon was damp and hotter than anywhere I had been at that time of year. In November the sun rose at 06.30 and set at 18.00 and the nights were hot. In answer to a letter saying ‘I suppose you sleep like a log’ I wrote home ‘Not so; we go to bed sweaty and toss all night on damp crinkled sheets under a mosquito net; in the morning we are bleary eyed, sour mouthed and still sweaty.’ Our 40 or so officers dined in a central Regimental Mess. It was hardly possible to know every one unless we went out together with a battery, or lived in the same house, or they happened to go sick. John Wills, the young man whom I had refused to leave in the Rangoon hospital, was one of the sick - now cured, I was glad to find. Another officer, who moved in

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

genteel Saigon society, to his surprise though not to mine picked up venereal disease and came to me to complain,

‘But she looked so respectable, and she didn’t want to be paid or anything.’

I had problems with the men catching venereal disease. Girls were available all over the place, and one man complained to me about a girl with whom he had been lying on the edge of the parade ground just outside the barracks: as well as her fee she had taken from him the rest of his money and his paybook or AB64, a document more precious in the army than a Passport.

‘And what’ I asked ‘was your mucker doing while all this was going on?’ ‘Oh him, he was standing by in the field having a fag.’ I lectured them at intervals and arranged for there always to be in the MI room a tray of condoms to which they could help themselves without asking when they went on the town. The sheaths disappeared at an alarming rate and I found that they were taken in handfuls and sent home by airmail to be ready for the man’s repatriation, now for many of them not far away.

Occasionally I did a tour of the red light district with the Military Police but there were so many troops, mostly Gurkha and Indian, in Saigon that I rarely found one of our men there. I did not afterwards think that I did much by touring those dark and dirty little cubby holes.

Batteries went out of Saigon several times during November and December and I accompanied them. Our small convoy bristled with weapons but as a rule all was quiet and I enjoyed the drives through new country.

We might be out for a week at a time, and not necessarily in aid of the French.

Diary. 27th November. Returned this evening from a trip up country. Out last Friday and back today, Tuesday. The nights were spent bivouacking in rubber plantations, jungle, or open scrub. I enjoyed it though it was all strictly army: we travelled in convoy, there was no unarmed strolling, and no solitary trucks. Our guns and posts were manned all night, but all was quiet; no arrows, no spears, we killed no one and no one tried to kill us.

This morning on the exercise I laid and fired a gun over open sights at a tree 500 yards away, hitting it with two shots out of three. I very much enjoyed myself. It must be strange to be a gun layer in battle, the chap who actually sends those wretched things through the air.

We did not in fact go very far - north-east from Saigon and just over the border between Cochin China and Annam. We turned back at a place roughly 100 miles north of Saigon where a big bridge was down. On the way back we made a diversion. We covered about 40 miles a day, quite good going, a rate of travel that gives an idea of the interminable halts, turnings and waiting that go to make up 'another blank scheme' as the BOR calls it - and he is right. He has the work to do, but I enjoy it, the new country, jungle as thick as ever I saw in Assam or Burma, and the cold starry nights, so cold that I sleep with a sheet over me. It is down to 70 degrees at night.

I spent a lot of the time on the outing with the assistant adjutant, Sidney Woodruffe, once in the Portsmouth CID. At night, under tarpaulins, we played cribbage and discussed the British soldier and his language, which we imitate and exaggerate. Late at night we watched the Southern Cross rise after Orion and Sirius. These were pleasant nights in the open, but the men who had been long with the Regiment were tiring of 'schemes': Lieut JP Honour out on a scheme today drove his guns into a paddy field, saying to the crews, 'No.1 gun here, No.2 gun there,' and so on. When he came back from attending to guns 3 and 4 he found No.1 gun up to the axle in mud and said to the sergeant in charge 'Is your gun bogged Sergeant?'

'No sir, I'm burying the bloody thing.'

On one outing I had orders to visit a Jap Depot Medical Store to make an inventory and confiscate anything useful to our Service.

I brought away whatever I thought it reasonable to bring, leaving them what I thought the minimum with which they could carry on. My finds included a beautiful Japanese microscope. I had to tell them, when they objected to what I was doing, that if they had objections they could 'put in a claim through the official channels.' I felt a bit mean about it. I should have liked the microscope myself.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

On another outing we did a 'practice shoot'. I drove several miles with the CO, Charles Armour and one or two others to a remote spot on a deserted hillside - our 'OP'; from it we could overlook a small valley in which there were clumps of trees. I was instructed to pinpoint one of these clumps on the map, range on it and give orders to the twelve 25-pounders of the regiment to shoot at it simultaneously from five or six miles away. A shoot at one spot by all the guns at once was known as a 'Mike Target' and was very thrilling for someone who had never fired anything bigger than a 12-bore shotgun or a hypodermic syringe. I spoke over the radio: 'Mike Target, Mike Target, Mike Target. Map reference so-and-so, Height so many feet, Right ranging', and a 25-pounder shell would come screaming over for me to check the range and bearing. When I had the ranging shots bursting in the right place I would say 'Record as Mike Target 12', or whatever it was. Then came the climax - 'Mike Target 12, Stand by' - 'Mike Target 12 - FIRE!' and seconds later the salvo of shells whistled over our heads to burst around the chosen tree. The CO stood by, grinning like a satyr and pulling my leg every time I gave a wrong order.

It may have been practice for the regiment but they were also out to give 'The Doc' a day's fun: I reckoned that in shells alone the taxpayer must have paid £5,000 for my little 'shoot'.

Diary. Paddy O'Brien and I were idly saying this morning how flat life now seemed and how we sometimes secretly wished the regiment might be in action again. But today recalled the awful reality too well: the crack of a bursting shell, the whistle as it comes, the whirr of spent fragments and the smell of explosive. No, I'm glad the war is over. Still, something lingers: I shall never again live a life so keyed-up.

I am left with an unsatisfied feeling that I've done and seen nothing in this war.

On the 9th December I returned, sunburned, dirty and tired from a jaunt to a seaside resort near Cap St Jacques, or Cape Jakes as Bird my driver called it. We started on a Wednesday and came back on the Sunday, Pete Furlonger and another Battery Commander Francis Casement, myself, and two Troops from Pete's battery, complete with

batmen, cooks, signallers, gun crews, junior officers, and guns. Owing to road blocks we took two days to cover the 80 miles to the coast, and on the first day we ran into an ambush in a place as quiet as a country lane in England, doves cooing, insects humming. Pete, with batman, driver and wireless operator, was in the leading jeep, going up a small hill with jungle on each side of the track, when a machine gun opened up. Windscreens were smashed and several trucks had bullet holes but no one was touched except a Jap who happened to be coming towards us, walking harmlessly at the side of the road; he was killed. Pete sent a patrol through the bush and found a small abandoned trench in which were two cross-bows and a few arrows. The cross-bows were about 3 ft 6 ins across; the arrows were of bamboo with jagged barbs cut out near the business end; they were smeared with a treacly red liquid that looked like some sort of poison. They looked "horrible" as Bird said. We had no more trouble and went on to a place just past the small town of Baria and camped in an empty house set back from the road. Drums beat at night and there was an uneasy atmosphere.

Baria to Long Hai. We moved on, clearing road blocks, to a house on a hilltop, fronting the sea, a rich man's villa, empty of furniture. In the distance, to the south, was Cap St Jacques. In the evening we tried to play poker and listen to the sound of the surf, but were distracted by the beating of drums. The men got jumpy too. About midnight someone fired a shot and then everyone began to see moving shapes. Shots were fired in the night at prowlers that were not there. A shameful episode.

We bathed next day in a big surf and in the afternoon went into the village of Long Hai for fresh fish, geese, ducks and pigs for which, to the astonishment of the villagers, we paid. I spent time with the fisher folk; they were Chinese and had shallow boats 15 to 30 ft long with sweeps, a short mast and a small sail. Peter and I tried to get taken out for a sail but the boatmen said that the wind was too gusty. I thought the boats would probably only sail on a broad reach or with the wind aft. They fished with nets or with a hand-line, baiting the hooks with scraps of fish. I watched one boat being fitted out for the night's fishing by three old Chinamen. As well as their fishing gear they had bottles of water, faggots of wood, a tray of sand for their fire, slow-

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

burning rope's ends to light the fire perhaps, long fishing poles, bananas, a few vegetables, a cooking-pot and an anchor made of stones in a sack. I wished that we were going with them. A night out on the ocean in one of those boats would be something to remember. Later, from the shore, we watched the dozens of little lights bobbing up and down far out. In the evening I went up the coast in a jeep with Pete and Francis. The track was bordered with red flowering bushes, and great boulders littered the hillsides and the foreshore. The night was very windy.

There were noticeable offshore and onshore breezes at morning and evening; at that time of year the climate was not damp and I did not think it as hot as at the hottest times in Burma. But the heat of the sun could be scorching after 11.00. A motor ride, even though I had often been out and about on foot in the sun, left my face red and peeling.

On the morning of our next to last day at Long Hai I was stung when I got up in the morning by a scorpion that was lurking in my swimming trunks. The sting was painful for a few hours but did no harm.

Diary. 9th December 45, Long Hai to Saigon. I woke before dawn and sat on the verandah looking at the long lines of the waves and a headland against the dawn. Cool wind and a reluctance to go 'back to school'. We were off at 08.45, stopped to buy more pigs and ducks in the village, and reached Saigon at 14.30 after a blisteringly hot journey.

We went to Long Hai again on 12th-14th December, without being shot at, and had a practice 'shoot' with the 25-pounders on some open ground. Next morning a signal came from the CO to say that 231 Battery on its way to join us had 'run into heavy trouble'; we were told to return next day. That evening everyone was a bit jittery, BORS cleaning and oiling bits of Sten guns that had not seen daylight for weeks. We played Mahjong while the eerie drums beat on every side; they were probably part of an innocent Chinese celebration, but no one attended to the game. Pete was a good leader and at the evening Order Group gave all of us confidence. In Burma he had won a Military Cross and become adjutant. Then he was made a Battery Commander

and promoted to major. He was tall, 25/26 years old, with very fair hair, a bit thin on top. Before the war he had been going to be an engineer but now that he was due for 'demob' he had no idea about a career. He was very good in a tight spot and when everyone was jittery; he knew what to do and could produce the sort of rueful joke that cheers and makes what seemed dark and gloomy lose its terrors.

We started in the morning at 07.00. A 'tractor' went first, towing one of the guns so that if we had trouble on the road we could turn the gun and shoot over open sights at any obstruction. I rode in Pete's jeep; my wagon, 'A3', was in the second half of the convoy. As it turned out, we had a quiet run through, making contact by radio at half way with the CO who had come out in a light plane and was overhead watching our progress until at Bien Hoa we were met by an escort of the Frontier Force Rifles.

The political situation in Indo-China was getting worse. We were disarming and imprisoning the Japanese and everyone knew that we and they would soon be leaving. Swords taken from the Japanese in Saigon were formally presented to officers in the Division and I attended a parade at which I was given a beautiful sword reputed to be 400 years old; it had belonged to a major. Pale young French troops with white knees were arriving by sea, and we were told that the Annamites had offered temporarily to accept British rule rather than go back to being a French colony. Our ignorance, as junior officers, of what was going on was abysmal, and we had no idea that except for the neutral, or neuter as they were called, people like the Chinese, the 'Free Annam' party was communist all through, followers of Ho Chi Min. We did not like to think of the next few months there.

*

The ADMS came to tell me that 59th Field Ambulance was going to Borneo; would I take over a company that was going to Jesselton (Kota Kinabalu) in British North Borneo (Sabah)? 'It is a step to being 2nd in command; would you not like promotion?' I should have liked it well enough although I should miss the gunners. I said 'Yes.' Mackenzie told me that Jackson had spoken to him too, and he advised me to take the chance; he promised to put in for me a recommendation

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

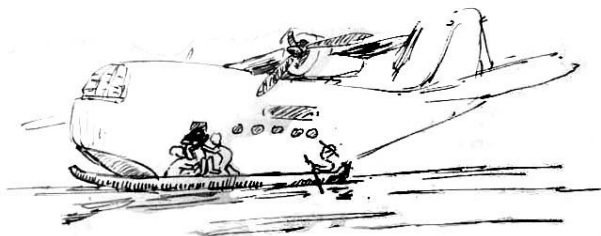
for promotion, a promise that the new adjutant Donald McCulloch afterwards told me that he faithfully kept.

On Christmas Eve I transferred to the Field Ambulance. I should have 50 beds, and a staff of one Indian doctor, two BORs, and 70 IORs. As I had never been in a Field Ambulance in my life I should have a lot to learn. The staff were a mixture: 2nd Lieutenant Foddar who was a Kashmiri doctor from Srinagar, Jemadar Dhanan Jai, Corporal Hewitt and Private O'Kelly, a few Kumaonis and about 50 Lushais from the hills on the Indo-Burma border; my batman was a Gurkha called Lal Bahadur, 5 feet tall, with a straggly wispy moustache, and my driver Ata Mahomed came from Baluchistan.

I spent Xmas night with an Annamite-French couple who had two charming chubby children. Two days later I had a farewell party with the Regiment and toured Saigon until late at night when my friends set me down at the quayside, threatening to be back in the morning to see us sail.

28th December 1945. Aboard SS *Arona* in Saigon River. Sailing with us were the 4th/2nd Gurkhas, whose CO was Lieut Colonel Kitson and whose MO was a pleasant, humorous and intelligent Pathan called Alamgid Khan (World- grappling Khan, as he laughingly translated it); he spoke Persian and Pushtu, Nepali and some of the Indian languages. His English was excellent. When we reached Jesselton the nearest other hospital would be at Labuan, an island a hundred miles to the south; the rest of the Field Ambulance would be at Kuching six hundred miles farther. I looked forward to it.

As we cast off a Dogra pipe band on the quayside began to play - 'Over the Sea to Skye', 'Auld Lang Syne' and a few haunting tunes of their own.



Chapter 22 Borneo

My last view of French Indo-China was of 'Cape Jakes' and Long Hai where three weeks earlier we had been sea-bathing. We reached Jesselton in North Borneo on the last day of 1945.

The ship's officers were brisk, stout, jovial men dressed in spotless white shirts and shorts; they made rather obvious jokes about sea-sickness and laughed so heartily that everyone joined in. Among the passengers were four women belonging to the FANY, 'Fannies' as they were called. One said that she was 'mad about poker' and continually drew attention to herself:

'Would I be awfully greedy, Captain, do you think, if I had another helping of bacon and sausage and egg?' The Captain had no strong views about it. She was seasick the first day out and I thought our table would be without her for the voyage, but next day she was there again, as large as life and as hungry as ever.

The *Arona* was another old B & I ship like the *Rajuna*, about 10,000 tons, with comfortable lounges and dining rooms, and 4-berth cabins. She did about 10 knots and before the war used to ply between Singapore, Rangoon, Hong Kong and Madras. Food always seemed good on a ship: fresh fish, fresh vegetables, freshly baked scones. We realised then how monotonous British rations on shore had become. The IOR rations were the same wherever we went but the IORs did not mind that; and besides, on the boat they suffered badly from seasickness. It was cold at night on board and I slept with a blanket over me. A sea wind was different from all other winds.

We approached Borneo over a very calm deep blue sea. Our first sight of the island was of cloud, white cumulus cloud rising here and there along the coastline, heavy grey cloud covering long ranges of dull green dark hills inland. Cloud lay in the hollows of the hills and

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

curled over the crests of ridges. A mist base lay along the whole sea's edge. I read in a book once that the humidity in Borneo was high and that the temperature scarcely varied between 88 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit. From the sea it did not look like a country for which anyone would want to fight. We anchored off the small town and in the afternoon I went ashore to look at a site already chosen for us by the Australians whom we were to relieve. For three days we ferried baggage, men and vehicles to a small pier.

The Australians had taken over this part of Borneo after the Japanese surrender. They boxed up 6,000 or so Japs in a PO W camp, put wire all round and saw to it that the camp was properly run. They also made the Japs build their own hospital and run it, under supervision. As Senior MO I was expected, in addition to being in charge of the Field Ambulance Company, to supervise medical arrangements for Allied troops and for the Japanese camp and hospital. The Australians were waiting to go home and were glad to see us. The Japs had treated Australians cruelly in Borneo and the Australian division that we relieved filled their prisoners with stories of what our Gurkhas would do to them with their kukris when they arrived - in fact the Gurkhas began at once to fraternise and my first sight of Japs and Gurkhas together was of big smiles and of cigarettes being handed round.

Much of Jesselton was a ramshackle shanty town built out over the sea on stilts; the single-storey wooden buildings stood on platforms several feet above water level. Under the platforms, which were reached by ladders, the inhabitants moored their praus or dugouts. In the main street were a number of white brick and plaster houses with red tin roofs; they gave the place a more solid look than the wooden shacks that made up the rest of the town. The only notable structure in the main street was a gallows; its framework was completely open, and a short ladder led to a platform with the trap through which the victim fell. The whole thing was well made and cared for, and the easy movement of the well-oiled mechanism suggested that it was 'for use and not for ostentation'.

A little way inland was a small civil hospital built of brick and plaster and, farther inland and uphill, in bamboo bashas, the Japanese hospital which I came to know later.

It was a lovely spot, the Tropical Island shore of romantic dreams, backed by low jungle-covered hills; not many miles away were the jagged summits of Kinabalu, nearly 14,000 feet high.

My camp on a small promontory was at the sea's edge under casuarina trees. The beach was generally clean and sandy except that between the camp and Jesselton the land was fronted extensively with mangrove swamp where small crabs scuttled about with a curious clattering noise. At high water when the moon was full the place was beautiful. It was cool at night and the surf was only 50 yards from my tent. Behind our camp was an inlet that filled at high water springs so that we seemed to be on an island. I went out on the first night to look round at the quiet tents on open sandy spaces under the tall trees, and listen to the slow regular sound of breakers. The blue outline of Kinabalu was clear against the moonlit sky. Crickets chirped and I could hear the whirr of flying beetles and the croaking of frogs. I spoke to our Indian sentry who was eyeing the rising spring tide doubtfully; he wanted to know where it would stop. He had never lived by the sea and knew nothing of tides, let alone springs and neaps. The breakers were small, a line at the edge of the sand; the water beyond was calm inside a coral reef that was two or three miles out. I was tempted to sit up all night.

The force at Jesselton consisted only of one infantry battalion (the 4th/2nd Gurkhas, my Field Ambulance company and a few ancillary units, a REME detachment under Bill Darley, and an RE section under Guy Lathbury, both lieutenants.

The Lushais of the Field Ambulance were a good lot, sturdy, intelligent, grinning, mongoloid in appearance, with sturdy limbs. They had their own language, though most could also speak Urdu, and they had characteristic names: Nekhupa, Thansianga, Kapthianga and so on, quite unlike the Rams, Lals, Singhs and Mahomets of India. I had us photographed as a company. In our best bib and tucker we posed in the open, some sitting, some standing and others on benches at the back. Some of the men were smoking cigarettes and I said, or so I thought, to Dhanan Jai,

‘Jemadar Sahib, get them to put those cigarettes out.’ The order was given and when I next looked at them every man had a cigarette

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

dangling from his lips. When my linguistic slip-up ('take out' for 'put away') had been corrected the photograph was taken, and the print shows us wooden, glassy-eyed, grimly unsmiling and as near being at attention as was possible for the non-military.

All the garrison bathed in the sea, and one evening we had a bad invasion of large jellyfish with long thick tentacles. Many of the men, mine and the Gurkhas, had sting-marks on their arms and legs which lasted for days, dark marks where the tentacles had wound about their limbs. The stings did no lasting harm but were painful at the time.

In January there was daylight from 0600 to 1830, and twilight was very short. I shared a tent with two Australian doctors until they left for home. One of them told me how lying on his camp bed he noticed his companion suddenly 'freeze' and by lamplight saw a snake appear at the neck of his pyjamas and slide to the ground. Some day's later I was standing at night under the casuarinas when I felt something cold slide up my leg and immediately thought of that story; very slowly, trying not to move, I undid my waist belt to let my trousers fall, and out came a very small jumping frog. I ate now and then in the Gurkha mess or asked one or two of them to join me. The younger ones could talk nothing but 'Gurkha' and had no opinion of non-combatants like us, but I liked Kitson the CO and saw a good deal of the officers of my own age, Khan the MO, Peter Sparkes, one of the company commanders with whom later I went up Kinabalu and Tom Wimbush, another company commander.

I dealt a lot with the Japs; many spoke English and I could always demand an interpreter. Some of the Japs were in a shocking physical state; a typical so-called 'working party' was in rags, emaciated and lacking all energy; I sometimes felt ashamed to come in from a swim and walk by them sunburned and well fed. One man in twelve was in hospital and a half of the others ought to have been there. I regularly went round their compounds and hospital, and inspected the sleeping huts, kitchens, wards and sanitary arrangements. One morning on my rounds I was given a Jap doll as a present. It was cleverly made of rags and wire by women prisoners and was presented to me by their head doctor. When I asked about food a Jap baker was brought and tried to explain how they improvised yeast; when I asked about dehydration a senior MO was brought who showed how they gave

intravenous fluids by some ingenious arrangement in which coconut milk played a part; I could not but admire their ingenuity and discipline. They never complained to me, and when I entered a ward on my way round the hospital every nurse and orderly stood rigidly at attention. So did those patients who could stand; those who could not stand 'lay at attention' on their pallets on the floor.

The senior Jap MOs wore leather knee boots and came everywhere with me, followed by juniors who sucked pencils and diligently made notes; the juniors, interpreters and ward staff wore wooden sandals. It was hot and dry and there was no shade as we went the rounds inside the barbed wire. I found them embarrassingly anxious to please.

Protheroe, my Field Ambulance CO, came to see me at the end of January. He was horrified at the condition of the Japs and took away with him a lot of figures about them which I supplied for him to write a report; we hoped that SEAC might be moved to help them with basic supplies. Given those, they had the knowledge and resourcefulness to do everything else for themselves. In Singapore, Mountbatten's staff at the time was trying captured Japs as war criminals; they seemed themselves determined that Jap POWs should not be given even basic remedies for the diseases that most afflicted them. All I got as a result of the report that Protheroe sent in was a signal from SEAC,

"ON NO ACCOUNT WILL JAPANESE POWs BE GIVEN MEDICAL STORES FROM ALLIED SOURCES"

I did in fact supply the Jap doctors on the quiet with what I could spare of the essential stuff - Atebrin for malaria and Sulphaguanidine for the dysenteries.

In mid-January a Gurkha was brought to me because his jeep had overturned; he had a head wound that looked as if someone had begun a mastoid operation on him and left it unfinished: the ear and scalp partly torn away from the skull. After cleaning the wound and putting in a few stitches I left well alone and two days later I saw him driving his jeep with as much attitude as ever.

Two weeks later another Gurkha was brought in after another road accident. No other vehicle was ever involved in these accidents: the

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

Gurkhas simply drove motors as if they were 'going over the top' all the time. That second man was deeply unconscious and showed no sign of coming round, so by radio I summoned a flying boat to take him to the Main Dressing Station at Brigade HQ, Labuan Island. The Sunderland, which looked enormous, arrived next morning and landed in the lagoon by Jesselton town. We paddled out with the unconscious Gurkha in a native prau, and lifted him in, thinking how out of place the slim dugout looked against the hull of the flying boat. I went to the flight deck to chat with the crew and thank them. Then I had breakfast ashore at the Gurkha mess with Peter Sparkes and we made plans for climbing Kinabalu. We decided to go on the 5th February with 24 Gurkhas, my Jemadar and four Lushais.

*

As the crow flies Kinabalu is about 30 miles from the coast. Peter and I travelled the first 20 miles by car in a couple of hours and then walked for two days to reach Kaung, 2,000 feet above sea-level and ten miles west of the summit. The Gurkhas said that deer and pig were plentiful in the jungle, and Peter gave them a day off to go out on 'shikar' with a local man who 'could call up Barking Deer'; they came back at nightfall with the tattered remains of a very small bird and we dined on bacon and eggs instead of venison.

From Kaung eight hours' walk in pouring rain took us over Tenampok pass, 5,000 feet, and down to Bundu Tuhan in a valley to the south. The natives were 'Dusuns', small cheery fellows wearing a loincloth or shorts and sometimes a vest made of bark; they went barefoot and carried parangs, long straight knives in wooden sheaths. They lived in Kampongs, clusters of three or four huts. Several kampongs went to make up a village like Bundu Tuhan. The huts were raised on stilts and made of bamboo and leaves. Halfway along the side of a hut was a doorway reached by a short ladder.

We stopped at Bundu Tuhan a day hoping for a break in the weather. The south ridge of the mountain was steep, about 45 degrees, and covered with soft, rich, soaking wet jungle; there were mosses, ferns, orchids, insect-catching pitcher plants, bamboo, rotting wood, and leeches and snakes; we climbed tree roots, forded streams and at about 12,000 feet reached rhododendron. We had left most of the

party at Bundu. As well as local coolies, those who came with Peter and me were my jemadar Dhanan Jai, six of Peter's Gurkhas and three special locals; one of these was Daniel Hiw, half-Dusun, half Chinese, who engaged and managed coolies for us. The other two were ragamuffins: Labuan, a self styled 'guide', and Tongal, a 'priest', to make appropriate sacrifices to the spirit of the mountain at intervals on the way. The rites put the coolies in a good frame of mind and brought Labuan and Tongal a small income from the sale to us of the eggs and fowls required for sacrifice.

Labuan was small and weedy, with pyorrhoea and bad teeth; I found later that on a steep jungle-covered hillside he could show any of us a clean pair of heels. The holy man was also lean and tough but had a shifty look. We took 15 coolies and four 'slashers' who went ahead from Bundu with parangs to clear the track. The Gurkhas came for fun and carried only their personal equipment. They sang much of the time, cheerfully but monotonously; they seemed only to have three tunes and Peter said that the words for all the tunes were the same - 'My girl's in the family way.' They devoted their energies to Peter's comfort and mine, making beds and shelters for us and bringing us tea. We walked separately at first and in the rain and mist I veered off the inconspicuous track and was lost until Labuan missed me and came after me like a dog on the scent of a wounded bird. The path was steep; in places we climbed by notches cut in tree trunks, and from about 5,000 ft to 7,000 ft we were bothered by leeches. Labuan walked beautifully - fast, and lightly as a feather. We caught up the others and in the afternoon reached Kemberanga (8,000 ft) in pouring rain.

Kemberanga, to which we had looked forward as though it were a comfortable hotel, was a dank clearing measuring 40 yds by 80 on a hillside too steep to lie across without rolling down. The slashers had put up leaf and bamboo shelters and lighted fires. We changed and draped our steaming wet clothes by the fires. The change from wet and cold to dry made Peter say,

'I suppose this is what we do it for.'

On our seventh day, the 11th February, we started early in a drizzling rain which settled down almost at once to a downpour. The

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

path was less steep and we climbed for three hours over boulders, moss, ferns, twisted trees, and rhododendrons to Paka cave (10,000 ft.). When we arrived I was shivering so much with cold that I could not even strike a match for a smoke. It had rained steadily for 48 hours and did not look like stopping. The Gurkhas lighted two fires in the cave and slowly we came back to life. The roaring river outside was a series of waterfalls - everywhere was misty and damp, and we sat around for the rest of the day, hoping for improvement; the curtain of rain sometimes cleared enough to give us glimpses through cloud of the huge summit rocks described as 'Mediaeval Castles' in the only printed account of Kinabalu that we had seen. The main Paka cave was formed by an overhanging boulder and was 8 feet deep by 15 feet wide by about 6 feet high. We closed the cave opening with leaves and raincoats hung on twigs. Outside the cave there was steep jungle where the coolies found smaller caves in which to shelter. Only once did the cloud clear enough to give a glimpse of the distant sea thousands of feet below.

Peter and I lay by one fire while the Gurkhas at another fire used their kukris to slice vegetables into a pan. Beyond them was the leafy wall through which we could watch the rain. Tongal the priest did us no good with the weather and in addition turned out to be a spoilsport: he said that the mountain spirits would be displeased by shouting, singing and the sound of the Sumputan, a weird looking wind instrument with pipes that made a pleasing low humming sound.

Above the cave steep jungle gave way to heathery trees and scrub that gave way in turn to steep slabs of fine grey rock speckled with black and criss-crossed with white quartz bands. We climbed over the slabs to 'The Sacred Pool'. On our right were groups of spectacular pinnacles and on our left the slabs steepened and curved down out of sight into mist. At the pool Tongal did more mumbo-jumbo and sacrificed one more cockerel; we were getting tired of Tongal and left him to study the entrails while we stumbled over broken boulders to the summit, 300 feet higher.

At the top was a wooden stake painted with Japanese characters. Mist prevented any view down the tremendous eastern precipice into 'Low's abyss' and we had no view to the west until we were far down the slabs on the descent.

In all from Paka I thought we climbed 1500 feet of jungle, 500 feet of slab with moss or scrub and 1500 feet of bare slab. At about 12,500 feet some of us started to race each other for the top and at that height found it utterly exhausting. By the time we got back to the caves Peter and I were tired out and could not at first eat any food.

13th February. From Paka to Bundu Tuhan was a long long way down. But the rain had stopped; we picked flowers and several 'monkey-cups' on the way. We stood out on projecting edges of the ridge feeling like soaring birds above immeasurable depths; the jungle plunged in gigantic steps to the valleys below; there was the coast - Jesselton, Tuaran, and the sea beyond dotted with islands. We paid off the coolies, Labuan and the High Priest (who was troublesome about his stipend).

*

Bill Darley's section of REME was on the beach near me. He had found that some of the Japs were shipwrights by trade and he got them to make him an 18 foot clinker-built boat with a centreboard. She had a primitive gaff rig and short bowsprit. He named her Samsue and we sailed her one night to the farthest of the small offshore islands that we could see. I lay on my belly in the bows staring through the clear water at all sizes of jelly-fish, opaque white or delicate mauve in colour. We brought Samsue gently to a sandy beach strewn with coral. The sun had just set and the horizon was full of colour and light. Jesselton was faint in the northeast; at hand the palm trees and coral rocks of the islet were silhouetted against the evening sky. The quiet water of the cove into which we had run the boat was clear and green.

'It is wonderful what a good education you can get from the Cinema,' said Bill. It was the typical Pacific island and our time ashore was pure delight.

We were admiring the little boat and the quiet after sunset, a quiet broken only by the sound of crickets and hardly at all by the backwash of the sea into the bay when three friendly children appeared from nowhere. We had not supposed that there was even a shack on the island. We gave them cigarettes and condensed milk in exchange for a coconut.

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

As it grew dark we could not see the mainland well enough to know where to steer and we waited until the lights of our camp began to show. Steering by these we ran back with a beam wind, fresh and drawing a little ahead as we went on. The boat was like an animal on the swell, swishing and slapping through the small waves and leaving a steady phosphorescent wake; after a while I steered by the island, gazing astern over the surging wake and singing tonelessly. We landed two hours after sunset. To the islet was about four miles. We had been away four hours and when I went to the tents after landing I found a patient waiting for me, a Gurkha with a dislocated shoulder.

On the 24th February a signal came to my office to say that I was offered 28 days' leave in UK. I expected to be out of the army in six months or a year, but I accepted: I hoped that after my leave I should come back to 59 Field Ambulance and could then be demobilised in India: I would go to the mountains then. But 59 Field Ambulance was disbanded during my leave and by 1947 India was in the turmoil of 'Partition'.

*

Tom Wimbush and I travelled luxuriously to Singapore in an empty 'Landing Ship, Tank', with RN Officers. Singapore harbour was full of shipping: troopships, supply ships, and local craft - junks and strange-looking rowing boats with broad sterns from which pieces of wood projected on each quarter. We went ashore at noon in the ship's launch to look for 'Embarkation' and at 1800 we were still waiting on the quay for transport into town. We tackled officers with lorries and officers with jeeps, and always got the same answer: 'Frightfully sorry, old boy, but its not my bando, you know'. The quayside smelled of rotting eggs.

At Nee Soon transit camp were two familiar faces from my student days, Peter Wright and John Walker; both had become specialists of some kind and I felt slightly remote from them, a poor relation. The camp was crowded with bored officers trying to move on - reinforcements, leave men and men waiting for repatriation and demobilisation. We hired a car and went up to Lombong, a sort of Brighton Beach holiday resort where we could scramble about on rocks and bathe under a waterfall in a gorge. We dined at the Tanglin

Club and talked about Oxford, now far behind us, and about the future. Another night we took a car to Johore Bahru. Pleasant houses overlooked Johore Strait and we sat out at dining tables on the lawns, looking down on the lights of fishing boats in the Strait. We seemed to be civilians again until back at Nee Soon I heard an RSM bark at a sentry, 'And get your heels off that brick - another six inches - d'you hear?' Pause. 'And take that silly grin off your face.'

There was of course no privacy in the camp and we queued for everything, to check in, to check out, to change money; we queued for tea or cocoa and for the beer, which had generally run out by the time you reached the end of the queue; and we even queued to eat.

One night as I walked down a passage after dinner I heard a yell and saw a big coal-black figure come running to fling himself on me and give me a tremendous hug; it was Kurup from 7 IMFTU; I had not seen him since Sadaung, near Mandalay, and I was enormously pleased. Next morning as I stood in a queue for tea, I heard another cry and another Indian presented himself with a wide grin; it was Foddar who must have followed almost at once from Borneo and now caught me up.

Tom Wimbush discovered that war crimes trials were being held in Singapore and we made a habit of going along and sitting in the public gallery. They were the trials which became known as the 'Tenth, tenth trials'.

On the 10th October 1943, after explosions which had damaged ships in Johore Strait, the Japanese kempe tei had arrested a number of civilians and POWs and civilians on suspicion of being implicated. The real saboteurs had come boldly by sea and had succeeded in getting away completely in a small boat without being caught. The kempe tei interrogated their luckless captives by torture and some died. It was 20 of these kempe tei, under Lieut Colonel Sumida, who were now on trial. The Presiding Officer of the Court was a Lieut Colonel Silkin; the courtroom was crowded with servicemen and civilians. We listened for days with morbid fascination to the witnesses' accounts of what the creatures in the dock had done to them and to those who died. A civilian called Robert Scott gave evidence. He had been brought from England for the purpose and was asked if

he recognised any of the people in the dock. At this the Japanese all rose and their colonel gave Scott a formal bow of recognition; a faint smile passed between the two.

‘War Crimes Trials’ Vol VIII, edited by Colin Sleeman and SC Silkin, records,

‘Scott was to withstand the most painful of tortures, the vilest conditions of incarceration and the strongest moral and physical pressure with a gallantry and good humour which the Japanese were quite unable to understand and which probably more than any other factor contributed to the survival of the majority of his fellow prisoners and himself. The same good humour and moderation of outlook and expression Scott later displayed in the witness-box; it will be long before those in court who saw it will forget the smile of greeting which, as Scott went to take the oath, passed between himself and Sumida, the principal defendant in the trial, who for months had schemed and battled to break his will. There was no malice between these two - but there was no doubt which of them had been the victor.’

Several years later I was able to ask Scott what had helped him not to give in, and he said,

‘One thing, you see, was that I knew them, and I knew that if I gave in I should be executed; they would have extracted justification for doing it.’

Weakness made us go day after day to listen to horrible details that sickened us for ever of the sight of those Japanese. Several of them, including Lieut Colonel Sumida, were hanged; the rest served long prison sentences.

*

Five months later, after purposeless journeys between UK and India I was in a boat (*The Franconia*) that reached Suez at dawn and stayed there until evening. In the morning we reached Port Said, after passing part of the night at anchor in one of the bitter lakes. In another lake we overtook and passed the *Stratheden*. On the bows of the ship were searchlights which reached out into the dark: the banks of the canal appeared without end before us. Port Said was the turning point of the voyage for every traveller between the Far East and England.

The figure of Ferdinand de Lesseps, later knocked down and destroyed by Nasser, then stood proudly over the harbour. From the anchored ship I could see the start of the canal that he built stretching in a straight line to the horizon and disappearing over the edge of the world. The temperature changed abruptly and serge battledress was ordered to be worn. Bright fresh regimental flashes and medal ribbons appeared, and we eyed each other curiously. In the Western Approaches single boats appeared from every direction and spoke to us, a contrast to the secret convoy travel of our outward voyage over a lonely ocean.

Our landfall was the Bishop Rock Light, Scilly Isles, where we were told that we were going to Liverpool. Two days later we had rounded Bardsey Island and were steaming along the Anglesey coast; it looked fresh and green. The hills beyond were hidden by cloud but those of us who knew the coast could pick out landmarks, Lynas Point where the Liverpool pilot came aboard, Great Orme's Head, the estuary of the Dee and at last the Lancashire coast and the entrance to the Mersey. Gulls came to meet us and took scraps from all the hands held out to them.

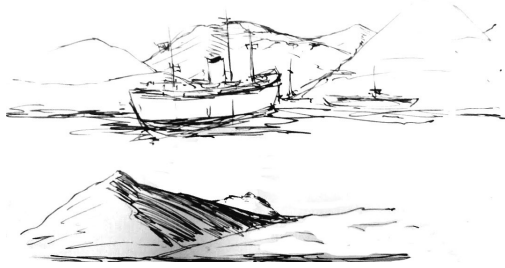
Rain began as we came into the Mersey and the evening closed in cold and foggy. We did not leave the ship until next day.

On deck, waiting to go down the gangway, I asked an Indian what his first impression of England was, and he said 'The pall of smoke over Liverpool.' A little girl looked over the rail and shouted 'Mummy. Mummy, come here. Look. White men, working.'

First we were to go to York. I missed the train because of some delay with baggage and long before I reached York the others had gone without ceremony, hurrying on to whatever they expected to find wherever they were going.

I toured a drab warehouse full of civilian clothes, and looked for something I could wear: suits, shirts, collars and ties, socks, shoes. The only possible garment was a raincoat not nearly as good as my old belted army 'Raincoat, officers for the use of'.

I helped myself and made my way back to the station with a brown paper parcel; it was all over, finished.



Additional Chapter Last Days in Burma

(August 1945)

After the two atom bombs had been dropped and notice of capitulation had come from Tokyo some of us thought that all was now over and we could go home. We soon found that we were mistaken. For one thing the Japs did not seem to understand the terms of surrender and tried to treat ‘unconditional surrender’ as a sort of honourable truce; in the vast area of South-east Asia to the east and south of Burma the Japs were under arms; and in Indo-China, Malaya and elsewhere thousands of British, Indian, French, Dutch and American POWs languished under atrocious conditions, many of them at the point of death. Those countries were infested also with nationalist and communist bands who had seen in the dispossession of the Colonial powers by the Japanese and in the subsequent defeat of the Japanese a unique chance to seize power themselves.

The prisoners of war had to be rescued, the Japanese had to be disarmed and sent home, and law and order had to be kept while decisions were made about the future of those countries and about the future role of the old colonial powers.

20th Indian Division was earmarked, though we did not know it, to take part after the fall of Burma in ‘Operation Zipper’, the invasion of Malaya, but now we were given instead the difficult, complicated and thankless task of occupying the southern part of French Indo-China, once called Cochin-China and centred on Saigon. Five days out from Calcutta we were anchored in Rangoon river waiting to disembark. When we passed Elephant Point on the way in it seemed as if the ship was sailing among flooded paddy fields. In the distance the Schwe

Dagon was once more visible; we had been able to see it from a long way out.

Local boats drifted downstream as we lay at anchor; each had three head of cattle in tow, swimming along behind. Ashore we saw endless tin roofs and lush green vegetation down to the waterside and, over all, rain, rain, rain.

We disembarked in the evening and made our way to a dismal transit camp near Insein. There was mud and inefficiency and we hung around, reporting here and there as instructed, carrying our own kit. I noticed that those who were new to the country drew attention to delays and inefficiencies which had not struck me as in the least peculiar; clearly I was becoming an old hand. If not 'an old Burma hand' I was beginning to go that way.

That night I found that the ADMS happened to be in Rangoon and was going back by special train to Divisional HQ at Tharrawaddy, taking some Civil Affairs people; I joined them.

Rangoon station was dark and deserted; the train consisted of empty box cars, and in a corner of one of them we made ourselves comfortable. I had bought a set of Liardice in Calcutta, we had all the beer we wanted and we settled down to play poker dice by the light of a hurricane lamp.

In the morning Ackroyd, CO of 42 Field Ambulance, drove me from Tharrawaddy to Letpadan and gave me lunch at the Field Ambulance. I got another lift to Sitkwin.

My return was like a homecoming, I was so pleased to be back in the village and with the regiment. I had a pile of letters waiting for me and even the unit postman said he was glad to see me. Maung Ohn and Maung Hla greeted me with broad smiles but the nurses seemed to have disappeared.

The CO had a warm greeting for me and must have decided that the ability to play bridge was not the only thing needed in an MO. While I had been away two MOs had been temporarily attached to the Regiment - the first had been got rid of by the CO because he was drunk all the time and the second had evidently been a great fusser: the unit sick parade had grown enormously, the Burmese patients did not

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

come any more and some members of my staff had put in applications for transfer to do other work. Too many people came to me with stories of what lousy things everyone else was about.

After four days things were again as they used to be. The sick parade shrank to a manageable size, the Burmese began to come back, the applications for transfer were quietly withdrawn and, best of all, the Karen nurses reappeared.

8th September 1945. Yesterday and today very enjoyable. Last night we bivouacked in a small glade of bastard teak about 3 miles north of Inma. There was sandy gravel underfoot, and a stream with clear pools.

This morning we did a 'practice shoot'. I drove several miles with the CO, Charles Armour and one or two others to a remote spot on a deserted hillside - our 'OP'; from it we could overlook a small valley in which there were clumps of trees. I was instructed to pinpoint one of these clumps on the map, range on it and give orders to the twelve 25-pounders of the regiment to shoot at it simultaneously from five or six miles away. A shoot at one spot by all the guns at once was known as a 'Mike Target' and was very thrilling for someone who had never fired anything bigger than a 12-bore shotgun or a hypodermic syringe. I spoke over the radio 'Mike Target, Mike Target, Mike Target. Map reference so-and-so, Height so many feet, Right ranging', and a 25-pounder shell would come screaming over for me to check the range and bearing. When I had the ranging shots bursting in the right place I would say 'Record as Mike Target 12', or whatever it was. Then came the climax - 'Mike Target 12, Stand by' - 'Mike Target 12 - FIRE!' and seconds later the salvo of shells whistled over our heads to burst around the chosen tree. The CO stood by, grinning like a satyr and pulling my leg every time I gave a wrong order.

It may have been practice for the regiment but they were also out to give 'The Doc' a day's fun: I reckoned that in shells alone the taxpayer must have paid £5,000 for my little 'shoot'.

Paddy O'Brien and I were idly saying this morning how flat life now seemed and how we sometimes secretly wished the regiment might be in action again. But today recalled the awful reality too well: the queer crack of a bursting shell, the whistle as it comes, the whirr of

spent fragments and the smell of explosive. No, I'm glad the war is over. Still, something lingers: I shall never again live a life so keyed-up.

I am left with an exasperating feeling that I've done and seen very little in this war.

11th September 1945. Camped near Taykkyi. Bathed in a lovely stream with the Signals Officer and the CO and then took out an instrument called a 'Director' to learn about surveying. With Charles Armour's help I painfully calculated the Azimuths of various bearings.

15th September. I drove into Rangoon with Charlie Armour. We went shopping, mainly for books, and in the evening drove back to Sitkwin.

For the last 40 miles we drove in heavy pouring rain and by the time we reached Sitkwin we were very tired. Perhaps because of this I felt very depressed. My chief feeling was one of irritation that I had done and seen so little during this war which was now finished.

20th September. The Regiment came down to Rangoon by rail, a slow journey with frequent stops. The whole of 114 Field Regiment was on the train in passenger carriages with crude wooden compartments. At one stop a message came through that the MO was wanted. I walked along the train to where I could see the patient surrounded by a small crowd. He had dislocated his shoulder and was holding his elbow cupped in the palm of the other hand in a way characteristic of 'dislocated shoulder'. All round were members of his Battery and anyone else who had heard the news and come to see the fun. Could the MO put it back? What would he do? I had not seen a dislocated shoulder before and my only knowledge of what to do was derived from textbooks read Oh! so long ago. When I came up to the man I whispered 'Has it been out before?' and was relieved when he said 'Yessir, quite often.' That should make it easier.

I seemed to remember two ways of dealing with this dislocation; one was to put your stockinged foot in the armpit and pull like hell, and the other, less crude, was by manipulating the elbow and upper arm across the front of the patient's chest. I decided to try the manipulation, which takes a little time because you must wait for the

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

muscles to relax. Everyone by now was showing the greatest interest in the outcome and probably laying bets. The train was waiting to go. As I made the last of what must look to the uninitiated rather a mumbo-jumbo of magic moves the joint quietly slipped into place. I don't remember that there was a subdued outburst of clapping as I tried to stroll nonchalantly back to my carriage but I attempted an air as though to say - 'Of course, it's all in the day's work, you know, for us chaps.'

We settled in at 'S' camp in Rangoon and found it reasonable. Large iron warehouses and facilities like showers for the men. I lived in a 40lb tent and set up an MI room in a corner of a warehouse. I found Rangoon now very hot and spent my days going from office to office or just sitting in my tent. It had a tarred cloth floor and a channel cut round it to let the water from the tent roof run off. A 40-pounder was 5 ft 6 ins high, and in floor area about 6 ft x 7 ft. It was a tent for one man if he had to find room for a bed, a chair and all his belongings.

My routine in Rangoon was simple.

6.30 Get up and shave, usually in pleasant early morning sunshine.

7.30 Breakfast.

8.30 Sick parade.

12.30 Lunch.

18.30 Supper.

The intervals were spent in chasing round Rangoon for medical supplies or now and then escorting a sick man to hospital. At Rangoon there was now an established Military Hospital, where I managed quickly to become *Persona non grata* as will be told.

I played a lot of chess, read the astronomical section of *Hints to Travellers* and went on thinking a lot more about my [immediate] future [life].

Before me lay on the one hand medicine or surgery, and on the other a life of exploration. It was easy to decide in favour of surgery as opposed to medicine because of personal inclination and a feeling

that if I ever had to practise in backward places surgery might be the more useful craft, but as between doctoring and indulging myself in the wilds, this was something I never could bring myself to decide, even later in life. Not knowing what opportunities would come my way I began to lay plans for all eventualities.

In the field of exploration my eyes were turning to the very eastern end of the Himalayas and I went to Army HQ for maps of the country between Burma, Tibet and China, a part of the world which, though I did not know it, was already a region of such lawlessness as to be inaccessible to a casual traveller.

One night at Rangoon we went out to dine at a Chinese restaurant.

There were Richard Crookes the Padre, Pete Furlonger who had been given a Military Cross and was now promoted major and had become a Battery Commander, Paddy O'Brien the Signals Officer and Donald McCulloch, recently arrived and now adjutant. Another new arrival was Major Hope who was also a Battery Commander. Donald McCulloch's father had made the first ascent of the Devil's Kitchen in north Wales and he himself liked sailing on the Menai Straits.

I did a lot of lecturing to the troops at this time, mainly on what could be called 'popular' medicine, like 'What happens to you if you have to go into hospital for an operation.' That sort of thing went down well and was always of interest to them; it was also much less boring for me than the usual talks on VD or hygiene, of both of which I was now tired.

In the evenings we played poker, usually losing or winning the equivalent in rupees of a few shillings. Our stakes were never very high.

Medical Services in Britain The postwar labour government had just been elected in Britain, and in the medical units that I visited there was a great deal of talk about the future of medicine at home; I had an idea that to work in a state run medical service in a socialist Britain might not at all be what I wanted to do in later life. My prejudice against a state run service was strengthened by an encounter I had with the CO of the British Military Hospital. I had in the regiment a young officer who was bothered with a skin disease; he had been treated

MANDALAY AND BEYOND

successfully by a skin specialist somewhere else but now had a recurrence, so I took him along to the hospital for advice. I could not find anyone with whom to leave the patient nor any 'skin man' to whom I could explain the circumstances, so I went along to the CO of the hospital, a full colonel, RAMC. I explained tactlessly that I had brought an officer who had been seen by a specialist elsewhere and that as we were soon to sail I did not want to leave him until I knew that he would be in good hands. I had taken a dislike to the set-up at that hospital and I added for good measure that he would be better off with me and in his own unit than if he were to be pushed about from pillar to post.

The Colonel was furious and shouted at me to put the patient in a ward and clear out of his hospital. I left at once but took the patient with me. I was very glad that I had done so: he was much happier to be staying with the regiment and very soon his skin condition began to heal.

The experience left me with a vision of what the General Practitioner would feel when a bureaucratic hospital official was rude to him. In private medicine the Specialist who wished to succeed had to be careful how he addressed the GPs who brought him his bread and butter, but the position of the GP vis-à-vis the hospital might be less happy under a state-run service.

By mid-September the GOC and advance elements of the Division had already flown to French Indo-China by way of Bangkok. The rest of us followed in a leisurely way by sea.