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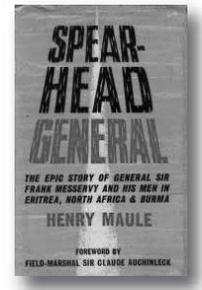
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## **BOOK REVIEW**

# ***Spearhead general: the epic story of General Sir Frank Messervy and his men in Eritrea, North Africa and Burma***

by Henry Maule

*Odhams Press Ltd: Long Acre, London; 1961; 377 pp.; Ursula Davidson Library call number: 580.01/27533*



Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck writes that this is a story about a British general who did more fighting than any other general in any army anywhere in the Second World War. Sir Frank Messervy, known to his troops as 'General Frank', entered the Indian Army in the famous Hodson's Horse to serve in World War I. By 1937, he commanded a newly armoured Indian cavalry regiment and this stimulated a strong belief in the need for correctly deployed armour which greatly influenced Messervy's later soldiering life.

Colonel Messervy commanded an improvised motorised force, "Gazelle Force", on the Sudan-Eritrean border in January 1940. Italian East Africa including Eritrea, Italy's oldest and best colony, was defended by 250,000 enemy troops supported by 200 warplanes. The 1941 Eritrean Campaign was conducted over some of the most mountainous landscapes imaginable against strongly resistant Italian forces who gradually concentrated on the mountainous plateau at Keren. Messervy, now commanding a brigade in the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, led from the front, whether by driving lead vehicles or from low-flying reconnaissance aircraft. The city of Keren was ultimately taken, at cost, by the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions and the remainder of east Eritrea was rapidly defeated. This important early allied victory removed the threat to the British rear in the Middle East and assured the convoy route by the Red Sea.

In the North African desert, Major-General Messervy, commanding 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division participated in the fateful Operation 'Battleaxe', where British armour was punished by Rommel's use of Flak 88s in an anti-tank role. Britain's failure at the time to use the more powerful 3.7-inch heavy anti-aircraft gun in a similar role remains a serious oversight in allied armour development in World War II. Messervy's 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, XIII Corps, gained significant successes over Deutsche Afrika Korps armour during later 8<sup>th</sup> Army advances from Sidi Omar to Benghazi in Operation 'Crusader'.

Major-General Messervy, transferred to command the redoubtable 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, once more faced Rommel who unleashed multiple heavy panzer units from his lair at El Agheila. During the resultant battle, Messervy, whose headquarters was always to the front, temporarily became a prisoner-of-war. In this battle of 'The Cauldron', Tobruk fell, 8<sup>th</sup> Army relinquished the Libyan Desert, and 'General Frank', with many senior Desert commanders, was dismissed.

In late 1942, British forces descended into south-west Burma, but were swiftly defeated by a jungle-trained, battle-hardened enemy. Allied morale plummeted – the most sinister and significant outcome of the brief First Arakan campaign. In July 1943, Messervy now com-

manding the 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, introduced tank warfare to Burma, against significant opposition at General Headquarters, where it was viewed as 'impossible in the impenetrable jungle country'. He also proposed a new tactic, christened a 'Neapolitan Sandwich', whereby "we will fight back towards our own people and in doing so will destroy the enemy between us". Finally, he insisted that all divisional personnel, including clerks, would undergo training in jungle fighting. These tactics were successfully deployed in the Second Arakan campaign, where even Messervy himself served in the front-line during the so-called Battle of the Admin. Box. The additional factor in the victory was regular air re-supply using 'parajutes' – highly efficient cheap parachutes invented by the jute merchants of Calcutta.

Early 1944 saw the Imperial Japanese Army suffer defeat for the first time in the Burmese campaign. Tactics proposed and executed by Messervy rendered a catastrophe on many of the formations of 55<sup>th</sup> Japanese Division in the Arakanese jungle. Messervy's men even captured some 50 prisoners, unheard of up to that time. Having blunted this southern Japanese 'March on Delhi', the northern Japanese pincer suddenly erupted around Imphal and the northern settlement of Kohima to where brigades from Messervy's 7<sup>th</sup> were rushed.

In December 1944, Messervy was appointed to command IV Corps, 14<sup>th</sup> Army, which was to lead the initial crossings of the Irrawaddy to attack Meiktila. The river crossing was the longest opposed river-crossing of the war and involved the construction of the longest Bailey pontoon bridge in the war. After a tour as Army Commander-in-Chief of the new state of Pakistan, General Sir Frank Messervy, KCSI, KBE, CB, DSO and Bar, retired in 1948.

Maule's narrative includes numerous well-researched eye-witness accounts from participants of all ranks in Messervy's commands in the three theatres of war. The work painstakingly records strategic geo-military descriptions of all the main theatre battles. Written in three parts, the book contains many monochrome illustrations, several explanatory maps and an index. Maule vividly describes how Messervy fought his battles at the sharp-end, none more typical than the chase to Rangoon through more than 300 miles of enemy-held territory, the longest and narrowest (often only a few hundred yards wide) salient in the history of warfare. The book is highly recommended. It provides an excellent narrative about three different classes of enemy – Italian, German and Japanese – and three land warfare terrains – mountain, desert and jungle.

**Bruce Short**