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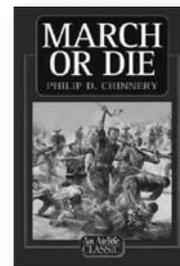
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## ***March or die: the story of Wingate's Chindits***

by Philip D. Chinnery

*Airlife Publishing Ltd: London; 2001; 256 pp.; ISBN 1 84037 289 3;*

*Ursula Davidson Library call number 580.01 CHIN 2001*



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

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

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

Most of the time in Burma, the Chindits moved in 'columns'. A column was about a half-battalion-sized force which moved on foot, with mules and horses for carrying heavier loads. Each column had a Royal Air Force detachment to coordinate aerial resupply and close aerial support. A column could be ordered to break up into dispersal groups of about platoon size to evade the Japanese. Some columns achieved great success, whereas others were disasters.

Initially, the Chindit organisation was poor logistically. Wingate's basic assumption was that, with good radio communications and reasonable air superiority, he could rely on aerial replenishment and do without conventional lines of communication, in the tropical dry season. Wingate's medical and administrative staff had not pushed hard enough for a suitable ration scale. The Chindits were given standard ration packs which, unless supplemented by fresh rations, were not intended for use for prolonged periods. The emaciated physical condition of the survivors of the columns imposed a large logistic burden on the administrative system. Some rations that were air-dropped to the Chindits were 'ratted' – the smokes and chocolates were stolen. As anti-malaria drugs were supplied with the rations, when the rations were gone, the soldiers were both hungry and more vulnerable to malaria. However, Wingate applied lessons learnt in 1943 to the 1944 operations.

When Wingate raised 3<sup>rd</sup> Indian Division (Special Force), it had six brigades and attached troops. It looked very much like a corps. Each brigade had three infantry battalions, as well as an armoured unit without vehicles, or an artillery unit without guns, acting as a fourth infantry unit. He preferred this four-battalion brigade model to the British three-battalion model, as he appreciated that infantry was the dominant force in jungle operations.

For the 1944 operations, most of the division was flown into airstrips prepared in jungle clearings that had been seized by glider-borne Chindits. There were no large-scale follow up ground forces to relieve the airheads, which were defended and eventually abandoned at the onset of the monsoon.

On 11 March 1944 as the build-up of the air heads continued, Wingate issued an order-of-the-day with the succinct phrase: "All our columns are in the enemy's guts". To the north, the Japanese were fighting the Chinese, to the west they were fighting the British on the Indian border, and the Chindits were astride their lines of communication.

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

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

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

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

**John Hitchen**