

Australian commandos in China

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Before the outbreak of WWII, the British Army began training 'Independent Companies' at Lochailort in the Scottish Highlands. They were used in guerrilla-style operations in Norway between April and May 1940, and formed the nucleus of modern commando units. The Special Operations Executive (SOE) was formed to coordinate overseas subversive activities which were also extended to the Dominions. This resulted in Military Mission 104 being sent to Australia and New Zealand and established the training area in the rugged terrain of Tidal River at Wilson's Promontory in southeast Victoria. The first intake to No 7 Infantry Training Centre commenced on 24 March 1941 for a gruelling course in raiding techniques, sabotage and guerrilla warfare. In total eight Australian and two New Zealand companies were trained here. The trained personnel were subsequently deployed in the South Pacific, Singapore, Malaya (Malaysia) and Burma (Myanmar).

Key words: Special Operations Executive (SOE); Military Mission 104 (Tulip Force); sabotage; guerrilla warfare; Burma Road; Special Training School 101 (STS 101); Rose Force.

Background

Before the outbreak of the Second World War, Germany and Japan built effective secret organisations for the purpose of carrying out espionage and subversive propaganda. The Japanese also successfully spread influence amongst native populations promising co-prosperity and peace to peoples freed from Western colonialism.

To counter these initiatives, an organisation later known as the Special Operations Executive (SOE) was formed in Britain using propaganda and subversion to encourage popular resistance against potential enemies. At that time, Britain faced threat of imminent invasion and the possibility that Japan might strike against British, Dutch and French interests in the Far East.

Prior to WWII, Britain maintained armed forces in mainland China, however, with Japanese advances into the Orient these proved an irritant. To appease the Japanese, a flotilla of Royal Naval gunboats on the Yangtze was withdrawn in 1939 and sent to Singapore. The British battalion in Tientsin was withdrawn to Egypt in late 1939, and the last two battalions at Shanghai arrived in Singapore in September 1940. Within the Chinese mainland, this left Britain only the poorly defended colonial outpost of Hong Kong.

The first commandos

Borrowed from the Dutch, "Commando" described irregular forces used during the Boer War, but the history of irregular forces extends from ancient Rome to modern China. In contemporary terms, before the

outbreak of WWII, the British Army began training 'Independent Companies' at Lochailort in the Scottish Highlands. Following the German invasion, five of these companies, each of about 300 officers and men were used in guerrilla-style operations in Norway between April and May 1940, and formed the nucleus of modern commando units.

In the same timeline, the Special Operations Executive (SOE) was formed to coordinate overseas subversive activities which were also extended to the Dominions. This resulted in Military Mission 104 being sent to Australia and New Zealand, sailing from England on 6 October 1940 in SS *Rimutaka* through Panama to Wellington. They came well prepared bringing half a ton of plastic explosives, 36 Tommy guns, hundreds of Pacific islands maps, and portable radio sets.

Details of their arrival are sketchy as they transhipped in Wellington, arriving in Melbourne on 28 November 1940. Military Mission 104 was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel John Charles Mawhood, who had served briefly with the AIF (Australian Imperial Force) during WWI, and then in the Indian Cavalry before joining the Intelligence Services. Other members of the mission were Captains James Michael Calvert and Frederick Spencer Chapman (Training), assisted by two Warrant Officers Frank Misselbrook (Signals) and Peter Stafford (Explosives).

The young training officers, both Cambridge graduates, were exceptional characters. The older Michael (Mad Mike) Calvert was born to colonial civil servants in India, served in Hong Kong and spoke Cantonese, and was one of a few British Army officers to witness the ruthless Japanese actions in Shanghai and Nanking, and had earlier served in Norway. At Cambridge, he read engineering and ended up with a

¹Photo provided by the author.

battered nose won as a boxing Blue, completing his sporting prowess with a swimming Blue.

His younger companion Frederick (Freddie) Spencer Chapman was orphaned at an early age and fostered by a clerical family. He won a scholarship to Cambridge, reading history and English but also enjoyed outdoor pursuits. Becoming an accomplished mountaineer, he was selected for Polar and Himalayan expeditions, and awarded the prestigious Polar Medal. Before joining the Army, he was a schoolmaster. He trained with Calvert and also had gained operational experience in Norway.

Mawhood and his team were regarded with suspicion by the Australian military establishment as they were not traditional Army men. Their leader with an honorary army rank, who had arrived with his wife and children was a secret service agent more interested in political activities than training special forces which was left to his subordinates.

Chapman and Calvert came across the rugged terrain of Tidal River at Wilson's Promontory in south-east Victoria, ideally remote from prying eyes and reminding them of their original Scottish training school. With a site selected, Army-style wooden huts were built and talent spotters sent to find suitable recruits. These were young men from 20 to 40 years of age - fit, tough and adaptable, preferably single without dependants.

The first intake to No 7 Infantry Training Centre arrived on 24 March 1941 for a gruelling course in raiding techniques, sabotage and guerrilla warfare. The 1st Independent Company of 17 officers and 256 men completed their training and marched out in July 1941, just as recruits for the 2nd Independent Company arrived, and shortly afterwards they were joined by the first New Zealand troops. In total eight Australian and two New Zealand companies were trained here before the Centre was moved to Canungra in Queensland in November 1942, where it still exists with a changed emphasis, now known as the Land Warfare Centre.

On 12 July 1941, the 1st Independent Company sailed from Sydney in the troopship *Zealander* for New Ireland, with detachments also sent to Bougainville and Vila to protect airfields. On 10 December 1941, the 2nd Independent Company was shipped from Darwin, again in *Zealander* to Portuguese Timor as part of Sparrow Force, and the New Zealanders later went to Fiji. As they became available, other companies were spread throughout the Pacific Islands. The above demonstrates that the Australian 1st Independent Company was employed operationally from July 1941, claiming the title of Australia's First Commandos.

To the Far East

A troop convoy left Sydney on 4 February 1941

bound for the Middle East and for most of the AIF 8th Division this was a great adventure supporting the Empire in its fight against the Hun. Nearly 6000 were embarked in one of the world's largest ships HMT *Queen Mary*. But when the convoy left Fremantle changes to the itinerary were made, and they were now destined for dreary garrison duty in the impregnable fortress of Singapore where they arrived on 18 February 1941.

In Singapore volunteers were sought to join the Bush Warfare School being established in Burma, now Myanmar. The demands of physical fitness were intense with many failing the application tests. Eventually about 50 Australians were accepted to join with their British counterparts. In August 1941, the Australian contingent commanded by Captain Fenton Braund boarded the steamer *Karoa* taking them from Singapore to Rangoon, thence by train to Maymyo in central Burma.

Burma – the land of Pagodas

Burma, the epitome of the exotic and mystical East is a land of the great beauty and can be idyllic for nine months of the year, then come monsoons of incessant torrential rain where dry streams become ragging rivers. In the worst months from June to August, most activity including warfare comes to a standstill. When the monsoons abate, insects multiply a thousandfold and for a while disease is endemic causing many a white man's grave.

Our pre-war generation would have known little about Burma other than perhaps Kipling's evocative *Road to Mandalay*, which pronounces:

For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple-bells they say:

Come you back, you British soldier, come you back to Mandalay.

A prominent feature of the landscape was the innumerable pagodas with their spires covered in gold leaf glittering in the sunlight. Pagodas needed attendant monks who did much for the poor and doubled as school teachers. Most Burmese children could read and write thus contributed to a highly literate society. And every Burmese male was expected to become a monk twice, once as a novice wearing the saffron robe and with a shaved head, and later for a period as an ordained monk, after which he could return to normal family life.

Under the Raj, the 'Land of Pagodas' formed part of India but with continued unrest in 1938 it became a separate colony with limited self-government. In 1940 Burma had a population of about 15 million, more than twice that of Australia and although mostly Buddhists, it was not a homogenous society, with a third of the land populated by peoples of different racial origins.

The capital Rangoon (Yangon) was joined by canal

to the Irrawaddy River, navigable for nearly 1000 miles (1600 km). Before railways, paddle steamers connected Rangoon with the then capital Mandalay. The cultivated vast coastal plains made Burma the world's largest rice exporter, and importantly oil was discovered, being shipped to British India. In the hinterland, as the land rises there was an abundance of forests with highly prized teak. Further north, the country was famous for minerals with large deposits of lead, silver, zinc and tin. Prior to the Japanese occupation, the mines around Namtu mainly managed by Australian engineers employed thousands of local labourers.

The larger Burmese population did not favour imperial rule that usurped most of the nation's wealth and which was repatriated overseas. This period was also an affront to their monarchy and religion, the twin pillars of their culture and civilisation. Through military might colonial masters sought to undermine their ancient systems of government, exiling their king and queen and replaced religious with secular institutions. The royal palace at Mandalay was ransacked and converted into a fortress for colonial troops named Fort Dufferin (after the Viceroy of India), another insult to a subjugated people. The migration of millions of Indian workers displacing indigenous communities and businesses was bitterly resented. For these reasons many were receptive to Japanese inspired anti-imperialist propaganda and joined guerrilla bands.

The Burma Road

We know much about the infamous 260 mile (420 km) Burma Railway built by local labourers and Allied POWs linking Bangkok with Rangoon, but how many know of an earlier Burma Road? The British and Chinese-inspired Burma Road ran from Lashio in Burma to Kunming in the Chinese province of Yunnan, and thence to Chungking to which the capital of China was moved in 1938.

As Japan had blockaded China's seaports, the besieged nation desperately needed supplies and a backdoor was provided by the Burma Road. This road built in 1937-1938 was largely hacked-out using primitive tools by the labour of 200,000 Burmese and Chinese men, women and children, of which many of them died. Travelling through rough mountainous country and having to traverse peaks to 9000 feet (2750 mts), it was 720 miles (1160 km) in length and became essential to convey supplies from India to China during the Sino-Japanese War.

Surprisingly given wartime contingencies some materials were readily available due to American aid. The American General Joseph Sitwell served as Chief of Staff to the Chinese Nationalist leader General Chiang Kai-shek and later served as US Commander in the China-Burma-India theatre. This

meant there were hundreds of American Army trucks driven by locally hired Chinese and air support provided by about 100 Tomahawk fighter aircraft flown by a highly paid American Volunteer Corps (AVC) known as the "Flying Tigers".

Far East training schools

British and Indian troops had been stationed in Burma from early colonial days, and there was also a large Burmese Police Service formed on military lines, and four battalions of Burma Rifles. Local forces were largely drawn from hill tribesmen of the Karen, Kachin and Chin communities.

The success of the training centre at Wilson's Promontory led the SOE to replicate similar facilities in the Far East. Accordingly, Calvert and Chapman were sent respectively to Burma and Singapore. Mawhood remained in Australia until 22 December 1942 when he returned to England. Now a Lieutenant Colonel, Chapman was involved in the establishment of Special Training School 101 (STS 101) in Singapore to train local Chinese, Indians and Malays to operate behind enemy lines in case the Malay Peninsula should be overrun by Japanese forces.

STS 101 was housed in a large art deco bungalow, formerly a private estate, in a secluded corner of Singapore at the mouth of the Jurong River. The Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements (Sir Shenton Thomas) sought to close it down as being defeatist and was alarmed at the thought of arming Communist Chinese. Chapman persisted and first trained local Europeans in guerrilla tactics but later extended this to include nearly two hundred Malay Chinese as an effective fighting force with links to Mao Tse-tung's Chinese Communists. When the Japanese entered Singapore in February 1942 the school was abandoned. Chapman continued fighting behind enemy lines with a small group disguised as Tamils who could fade into the local community. Both he and his Chinese Malays did considerable damage to Japanese communications and transport. Chapman was eventually removed from Malaya by submarine in April 1945.

Rose Force

Owing to the rapidly deteriorating situation, at the same time as STS 101 was being set up, Lieutenant General Percival, the General Officer Commanding Malaya agreed to the establishment of a small commando force, working in conjunction with the RN, to raid and disrupt behind Japanese lines on the west coast of Malaya. Rose Force like Tulip Force was named after the flower and it is coincidental that its founder was Major Angus Rose of the Argyll and Sunderland Highlanders. It was established on 23 December 1941 with two platoons, each of one officer and 24 other ranks drawn from the AIF, plus six local

European guides. The Australian volunteers were led by Captain D T Lloyd 2/30 Battalion reporting to Major Rose.

With no formal training for their new role, the force proceeded by train to Kuala Lumpur and then on 26 December at Port Klang, boarded Harbour Defence Motor Launches (HDMLs 1062 and 1063). Very soon their presence was known, attracting enemy aircraft but they succeeded in making a number of attacks on Japanese outposts. The Australians found difficulty in working under British command and some belligerents were returned and replaced by other Australians, with this whole group now under Australian command. As a face saving measure, Major Rose was given a complementary force of Royal Marines drawn from the survivors of *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales*. In mid-January Rose Force was back in Singapore and was disbanded after just one month on 27 January 1942. The Australian contingent of Rose Force fought well and claim to be the first members of the AIF to see action against the Japanese in Malaya.

Military Mission 204 also known as Tulip Force

Another Military Mission, 204, was headquartered in Chungking to give technical aid and training to Chinese guerrillas fighting against the Japanese. The Mission raised six guerrilla battalions to which British special forces were attached. This led to an Australian-style Bush Warfare School being established at the pleasant Burmese colonial outpost of Maymyo, in cool hill country 40 miles (65 km) northeast of Mandalay.

In October 1941, the now Major Mike Calvert with Warrant Officer Peter Stafford were sent to run this facility and prepare British and Australian troops to provide training assistance to their Chinese allies. The volunteer recruits were often experienced men drawn from disbanded commando units that had operated in the Middle East. They were provided with Australian-style slouch hats and because of unknown dangers, were on double pay. Following previous examples,



Route taken by Military Mission 204:

Map Source: "Lost Legion Mission 204 and the Reluctant Dragon" by William Noonan, published by Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987. Provided by the author.

they trained units of about 300 strong for each of six Independent Companies.

On 25 January 1942, the first contingent of Military Mission 204 set out for China under command of Lieutenant Colonel John Milman, a British Army officer who had served with Layforce (Commandos) in Abyssinia and Crete. The force now comprised three Independent Companies, including an Australian commanded by Major Fenton Braund. When they reached the end of the rail line at Lashio, they were loaded into vehicles containing six months' rations and large quantities of explosives, and in these they made the journey using the Burma Road to Kunming. The Chinese drivers made their passengers nervous as some trucks overturned on hazardous bends. The journey continued over frozen snow-covered roads until they found Hochi where the Australians loaded their stores onto a train, and on 17 February reached quarters at Kiyang, having travelled 2100 miles in 25 days. Here they camped with the Chinese 5th Surprise Battalion.

Upon arrival they were addressed by Lieutenant General Li Mo An, commander Hunan-Hubei-Jiangxi Border Area Army, who said:

Brothers-In Arms: Your coming to take part in the training and operation of our Surprising Battalions is an historical event in the war against the Axis Nations.

It is also a factor which will materially strengthen our forces in ridding this country of China of the savage and cruel Japanese aggressors. By so doing, we shall also be playing our part in aiding the democratic nations against the Axis tyrants who are seeking to crush and oppress so many peaceful peoples in various parts of the world. Our fight for the maintenance of world peace and human justice will receive fresh impetus and strength from your coming.

We are glad and very much encouraged to have you with us and wish all of you the best of health as well as the final victory of the Democracies.

The men of the Mission were now very fit, having completed lengthy route marches in the mountains carrying heavy packs. But the combined training with Chinese battalions has been anything but successful (wrote one officer). "Their standard of training is not very high; operations would be difficult and hazardous. Nevertheless, I like the officers of our Chinese battalion and I think that if the first few operations hold an amount of luck, future operations may be fair". The contingent provided training to their Chinese hosts and their relationships were friendly, although the newcomers knew only a few words of Cantonese, in the earlier belief they would be offering support in coastal regions whereas they were from far inland where Mandarin was spoken.

Some unexpected visitors

Sir Frederick Eggleston, Australia's first ambassador to China and based at Chungking visited the troops on 31 May 1942 and recommended to Australian authorities that they remain. The Australian embassy was also home to telegraphist Lieutenant Halson Philpott RNZN (Royal New Zealand Navy), recruited by Mawhood to establish a listening post of Chinese and Japanese communications.

The Mission was reported in the media by the Australian anti-imperialist journalist Wilfred Burchett then reporting for the *London Daily Express* and the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* from Chungking. With men of the calibre of Eggleston, Burchett and Philpott, the Australian authorities must have received reliable political advice as to conditions in this volatile region.

Early in 1942 about as far from the sea as it was possible to get, the Australian camp at Kiyang received a most unexpected visit from a Royal Naval contingent and their Chinese guides. Lieutenant Commander Gerard Gandy RN served as Commanding Officer of the 2nd MTB Flotilla based in Hong Kong. After expending their ammunition defending the island, the flotilla escaped rather than surrender to the Japanese who took control of the colony on 8 December 1941. After making contact with Chinese guerrilla leaders, Gandy took his flotilla of six small ships (one was 'blown to pieces' when attempting to leave) with 68 officers and men deep into Chinese territory where the vessels were scuttled. They then set out upon the mammoth task by foot, truck and train of completing a journey of over 3000 miles (4800 km) before finally reaching the safety of Rangoon. 64 of the original 68 survived this extraordinary ordeal, one of the strangest in the history of the Royal Navy.

Turning point in the war and homeward bound

The war in southeast Asia reached a decisive turning point in late December 1941 when Japanese forces crossed from Thailand and entered Burma. The population were alarmed by enemy bombing raids and in the following month British personnel began evacuating, leading to a mass exodus of Indians with over 500,000 making the perilous journey into India during which many perished. About 18,000 nationalists joined the Burma Independence Army which allied itself with the Japanese invaders. Chinese forces entered Burma providing some relief but after Rangoon fell in early March the end was inevitable.

In April, after weeks of training, orders arrived from headquarters in Chungking that the force was to operate in Burma, but this was later rescinded. Next, their battalion was ordered to Hengyang in central China which was reached by rail in early June and then further inland by river. They finally marched into

operational areas, travelling over mountains often in heavy rain and came to disease-ridden country near the Kiangsi border where a Chinese Colonel informed them they would not last a month. Tragically this prophecy proved correct as it was here that Sergeant Cecil Martin died and was buried.

In filthy quarters, the troops began to fall sick in increasing numbers. In the second week of July two men died, presumably of typhus and others had malaria and dysentery. In August there was more exhaustion marching to the west of the Nanchang-Kiukiang railway and illnesses increased. The troops became disillusioned with the soul-destroying marching seemingly without purpose.

The existence of the Australian contingent embedded with British Military Mission 204 had remained a closely guarded political and military secret. However, a copy of a letter from a trooper to his parents in Sydney was provided to Smith's Weekly who on 19 September 1942 carried a lead story with the headline: "*Another Lost AIF Legion in China? Mystery of 'Mission 204' Diggers Letters home from Chungking*". Basically asking why an Australian soldier missing for 9 months following the fall of Singapore was now serving in China.

Disease had taken its toll and the Australian contingent was down to 5 officers and 14 men fit for active service, and the other British contingents were equally reduced in numbers. Accordingly, the decision was then taken to withdraw by road to Kunming. With the Japanese having closed the Burma Road on 29 October the Australians were flown by USAAF from Kunming to Assam in northern India, thence by train to Calcutta. They were expected to join Brigadier Orde Wingate's commando force bound for Burma but this did not eventuate, and so after two years they were recalled home. They were shipped to the milder climate of Ceylon and on 25 November from Colombo they embarked in HMT *Mauretania* returning via Fremantle and disembarking in Sydney on 11 December 1942. Many, including the commanding officer of the Australian contingent Major Braund were in poor health and were hospitalised for some months before returning to active service. On arrival back home there was no fanfare for the return of this "Lost Legion".

Summary

The Australian members of the British Military Mission 204 learned much from their experiences taking them from Singapore to Burma, China and India before returning home, having to leave two of their mates behind. In all this time they did not encounter the enemy or fire a shot in anger but they did provide support to a Chinese ally who was endeavouring to hold back a brutal but efficient enemy. Such was the life of Australian Commandos in China.

In their own environment the Chinese possibly knew more about guerrilla warfare than their British/Australian counterparts. It is therefore doubtful if the Chinese really needed foreign troops, but desperately needed foreign aid, and would have to accept one to gain the other.

The Burmese campaign did not end well. Japanese and Thai governments had signed a Treaty of Friendship. The day after Pearl Harbor, on 8 December 1941, Japanese forces supported by Burmese insurgents began their incursion from Thailand into southern Burma. Continued support required a new supply route, hence the infamous Thai-Burma Railway. By mid-July 1942 the invading armies had driven defending British, Indian and American-led Chinese forces out of the country. The defenders employed a "scorched earth" policy involving the destruction of infrastructure which did not endear them to the local population.

The two heroes featuring throughout this paper were both highly decorated, being awarded double DSOs (DSO and Bar) but both suffered greatly from their wartime experiences and did not fit well into a post-war world. The charming intellectual Freddie Chapman who could hold an audience in raptures, married and with three children returned to teaching in a school, but in continual physical and mental pain, committed suicide at the age of 64. The extrovert born leader Mike Calvert had a shameful end being dismissed from the Army for unbecoming conduct involving sexual indecency, after which he lived a lonely life in poor circumstances, dying aged 85.

The commander of the Australian commandos Fenton Braund after evacuation from India was in poor health. Fenton with others from the unit were hospitalised in Sydney until discharged for further duties. Major Braund undertook tactical training before being posted to Queensland, and in June 1944 transferred to the Reserve and later resigned at his own request. On 4 January 1943 Fenton married Shelia Falkiner, widow of the prominent grazier Franc Brereton (Richard) Falkiner. After his discharge Fenton took up farming at "Foxlow" near Bungendore, later moving to a smaller property "Molonglo" in the same region. He died there on 30 April 1992 aged 78. Major Braund and his colleagues who served with British Military Mission 204 were the only known members of the AIF to receive the Burma Star medal.

The Author

Walter Burroughs started his seagoing career as a Cadet in the Merchant Navy before joining the RNZN (Royal New Zealand Navy) as a SBLT and later transferring to the RAN (Royal Australian Navy) as a LEUT, serving in the Far East Strategic Reserve and Viet Nam, and on exchange to the UK (United Kingdom) during the Falklands conflict. Following retirement as

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