

My BURMA CAMPAIGN

by Rex Wait

The 18th Field Regiment (Self-Propelled), Royal Artillery was equipped with the American 105mm howitzer on a Sherman tank chassis. These in the British Army were given the name *Priests*. At the time we were sent into Burma, in December 1944, I was a humble subaltern, the Troop Leader of Fox Troop, 94/95 Battery. Being something of an oddity, our Regiment was not assigned to any particular Division. It came directly under the Brigadier, Royal Artillery, at 14th Army H.Q., and we wore the 14th Army flash on our shoulders. The Regiment could thus be made available to support the armoured units of any of the Brigades in the Divisions of 33 Corps and 4 Corps as the Army Commander might require.

We crossed the Chindwin with 2 Div at Kalewa on Christmas Eve, and 94/95 Battery accompanied the leading squadron of the Gordon Highlanders tank regiment by way of 'Pink Gin' (as we always called it - its real name was Pyingaing) through the teak forests and along the dried-up river beds to the open agricultural areas along the Yu river and so to the township of Shwebo, encountering only fairly minor Japanese resistance.

At Shwebo we were able to sleep under a roof for the first time since we had left India, before moving down to the Irrawaddy. The Regiment then took part, together with a mass of other artillery, in a counter-battery programme of shooting across the great river in preparation for the imminent crossings. As soon as we moved into our allotted position we were machine-gunned by several small Japanese fighter planes, so we had to move to another position, where with unusual enthusiasm we dug ourselves in, carefully concealing both guns and command-posts from the air and sending the vehicles back to wagon-lines. We remained at this position for several days. Our shooting programme, minutely detailed in firing tables distributed to the commander of each gun-crew, continued day and night, and we had to learn to sleep through the dreadful noise when we took our individual rest periods. At night we used to receive a few Japanese shells to add to the noise, but fortunately they did not do any damage. Then one of our batteries was sent to support the 19 Div attack on Mandalay, another to accompany the 7 Div crossing near Pagan, while 94/95 remained to cross at Myinmu.

At this stage, in the latter half of February, I was suddenly moved to RHQ to take charge of the Regimental Survey Party, with the task of crossing with 20 Div to the bridgehead which was being established near Ngazun on the south bank of the Irrawaddy.

Before it was time for my Survey Section to move to the crossing point there was news of 59 Battery's activities on the southern bank of the river. I was sad to hear that that one of our best officers, Captain Merlin Burborough, had been killed while acting as a Forward Observation Officer with the tank squadron he was supporting. But there was little time to dwell on such things before I had to take my party of three jeeps, two pulling trailers, and ten surveyors to the crossing point between Allagappa and Myinmu. Our two trailers were intended to carry the theodolites and various other items of survey equipment required by the Section. But with typical ingenuity the surveyors had managed to secure all the equipment to various parts of the jeeps, so that the tarpaulin-covered trailers were free to contain nothing but personal baggage and a dozen extra tins of 14-men Compo rations which had somehow been acquired -I forbore to ask how! They would have been enough to feed the party for more than two weeks if all other supplies failed.

The raft on which we were to make the two-mile crossing had been built close by of heavy tree-trunks by the Sappers with the aid of trained elephants. It could carry several large vehicles or tanks as well as our three little jeeps. The raft was propelled by what seemed to us to be very small outboard motors attached at each side. Fortunately the weather was quite calm, since it was the middle of the dry season. Our one fear was that the Japanese air force might suddenly materialise out of the calm sky - but luckily they were being kept busy elsewhere. After what seemed a very long time we arrived at the bridgehead which had been established on the south bank - and took the first opportunity to brew up mugs of soldiers' *cha* (tea with sweetened condensed milk). We had maps with us showing exactly where we were to establish bearing pickets over the next two or three days, and we wasted no time in getting the programme finished. In a day or two we were joined by officers from 94/95 Battery, ready to go out as FOOs with the tank squadrons, able to summon up fire by radio from the guns which were still north of the Irrawaddy. I listened enthralled while Lieut. Teddy Lock, who had been out on one such expedition, described on the telephone to RHQ how he had watched a Japanese officer draw his sword and climb up on the tank in which a British Officer was riding. He attempted to fight the British officer hand-to-hand until he was shot and killed.

The Battery's guns and vehicles had now all joined us, and it soon became clear that there were not going to be any long programmes of fire from within the bridgehead, since the War would be moving too fast. So once again the work of the Survey Section would not be in great demand. I therefore asked whether I could return to my Battery, and was very happy to be posted back to Fox Troop, this time as Gun Position Officer, since the previous GPO had been moved to another battery as a Troop Commander. The new plan was that the Battery should be attached to a mobile armoured column, called 'Barcol' because it was commanded by Lieut-Col Barlow, the C.O. of the 7th Cavalry, an armoured car regiment. He was a flamboyant character, and his armoured car had the name *The Curse of Scotland* painted on it. Also in this column was a motorised battalion of Gurkha infantry. The plan was that we should break out of the bridgehead and proceed as fast as possible southward into enemy territory. During the daytime there was no enemy traffic on the roads, no doubt because they thought it too dangerous to risk being spotted from the air. Each night we would settle down close to a road junction and hope to ambush any Japanese vehicles that came along. Sure enough, Japanese supply lorries would often drive unsuspectingly into the ambush, sometimes using full headlights, so that we could see them coming from along way away. We continued doing this southward past Myotha, pyinzi and Pindale to Wundwin, about sixty miles south of the Irrawaddy. We turned north again, and stopped for a much appreciated rest outside the town of Kume on green grassland beside the Samar River. This was such a delightful spot that I christened it the Kume Lido, and swam there morning and evening. Not far away was Kyaukse, a big Japanese supply base on the trunk railway running from Mandalay to Rangoon, which was cleared and taken over by 20 Div. Meanwhile Barcol's task was finished and our Battery was ordered to proceed to Meiktila, which had already been captured by the Divisions which had crossed the Irrawaddy near Pagan, with the help of our Regiment's 59 Battery. It was by now the end of March.

The approach to Meiktila lay through dusty, desert-like country, quite unlike the area of the Kume Lido! Some years later I was reminded forcibly of it when I read H. E. Bates's novel *The purple Plain*, which describes just such a terrain. Meiktila was full of Allied troops, including a few Americans from General Stilwell's headquarters. They were anxious to obtain Japanese souvenirs, and our gunners happily bartered Japanese bayonets, pistols and other such articles for a few cans of American beer. They were also very pleased to exchange American K rations for anything out of the British 14-men Compo packs, which were very

much better. Unfortunately a large consignment of K rations, which were mostly compressed sticks of processed food tasting like flavoured sawdust, had been accepted by the British quartermaster authorities in Meiktila, perhaps because they were less bulky, and we were forced to make do with them for part of the journey south. I thought with envy of the illicit British rations which had been amassed by the Survey Section! Up to this time we had been supplied with rations partly by road and partly by air-drop, for which we had to rely on the faithful DC3 Dakotas of the US Air Force. It was now the beginning of April, and the monsoon would begin early in May. Obviously the attempt must be made to reach Rangoon before the monsoon began, which meant that all supplies would have to be dropped to us by air. At this juncture the progress of the War in the Pacific theatre compelled the Americans to withdraw some of the Dakotas from our front, so we were placed, first on half rations, then on quarter rations, for our journey south.

For the first time since February the Regiment was all together again. 94/95 was the leading battery, and we were very near the front of the 17 Div column, which stretched for thirty miles along the road. In front of us was the leading tank squadron, led by an armoured bulldozer of the Royal Engineers so that any weak bridge or other obstacle could be quickly by-passed. If we came to a village occupied by Japanese troops the bulldozer would sometimes make a track round it, so that we could leave it behind to be mopped up the infantry behind. As we moved down the road from Meiktila our current Brigadier (I think of 255 Tank Brigade) stood at a suitable vantage point to watch the column going by, as if taking a peace-time salute. An hour or so later we were swooped upon by a Japanese small plane (we tended to call them all Zeroes, but I don't think it really was). The pilot strafed our vehicles with his machine gun, while the observer threw little bombs out of the plane by hand. (It all seemed more like the First World War than the present one.) The only thing to do was to abandon the vehicles on the road and run to the surrounding fields for cover. We all scattered, and I tried to make myself as small as possible behind a little bush. The pilot chose to go for me, and I could see the line of the bullets coming towards me over the dusty ploughed field. I remember thinking quite dispassionately, "In a moment or two, either the line of bullets will have hit me or it will have passed me by. There is nothing whatever to be done about it." Fortunately they passed a few feet away, and the pilot decided to fly away. When we returned to our vehicle, which was a Toc-truck (a small tracked personnel carrier), we found it had been hit several times, but there was no serious damage, except to my canvas-covered aluminium wash-basin which had received a direct hit. We decided it was all the fault of the Brigadier for his pomposity in taking the salute! But from then on it was remarkable how, whenever the column had to stop for more than a few minutes on the road, all the troops without any orders were out of their vehicles digging slit trenches, just as the drill-book instructed.

There was a good deal of resistance at Pyawbwe, after which we received a comforting message about the next town, "Yamethin is reported clear". But as our long column slowly made its way into and through Yamethin we all had to run the gauntlet of a machine gun firing on fixed lines across the road. One motor-cyclist had his saddle shot away from under him! The rest of us, if not in armoured vehicles, could only cower down in our trucks, as I did in my 15-cwt, and hope. Fortunately there were no more casualties. It appeared that after the reconnaissance patrol had reported Yamethin clear the previous day, a suicide party with the machine-gun had returned during the night to set up the ambush we experienced.

We stopped some distance south of Yamethin and formed a box or laager for the night. 94/95 Battery's guns and vehicles were in the middle of this, with a ring of tanks belonging to the Gordon Highlanders guarding the perimeter. We were under the command of a recently-joined officer, since our former Battery Commander, Major Palmer, had become Second-in-Command of the Regiment and was therefore at RHQ, the other side of Yamethin. During this southward march reveille was at 1.30 a.m. every day, since the great convoy was required to get going well before first light. So we normally went to bed about 8 p.m. It was not until many years after the War that I learned from my friend Teddy Lock that I very nearly did not get to bed at all that night. Apparently our new B.C. had conceived the idea that I should lead out a patrol of gunners on foot back to Yamethin and deal with the machine-gun party that had given us the trouble there. Fortunately Teddy Lock decided to get on the radio to Caryl Palmer and report this to him, with the result that the plan was swiftly vetoed. If the Japanese party in Yamethin was a suicide mission, most certainly this would have been for my patrol of gunners! For we learned later that a much larger Japanese party with anti-tank guns returned to Yamethin that night from the east and dug in among the houses. That part of our column which had remained north of Yamethin was held up until they were eventually cleared out.

During the night we were all suddenly awakened by the noise of heavy machine-gun fire, coming from the Gordon Highlanders' tanks, which were stationed round the perimeter of the box. The noise went on for several minutes, and it soon became apparent that there was no enemy fire coming in. Our B.C., although he was not in command of the Gordon Highlanders, then did show good common sense by standing up and shouting loudly "Stop firing!". All the noise suddenly ceased, and further investigation revealed that there was nothing outside but an abandoned bullock cart with a very dead bullock between the shafts. By reveille all the spent cartridge cases had mysteriously disappeared!

On 16th April we arrived at the deserted village of Shwemyo. Just beyond this the road ran through a deep valley dominated by a 700ft ridge which ran along it for several miles. We laid out a gun position at the beginning of it, and as I passed the zero-line bearing to the guns with my artillery director (a kind of simplified theodolite), assisted by my GPO Ack (or Gun Position Officer's Assistant), the odd bit of Japanese ironmongery was falling from time to time. Occasionally we could glimpse a Japanese up on the Bluff with one of their Infantry Guns, a very small portable piece of artillery. Soon after I had returned to my small Troop Command Post a big Japanese shell from a distant heavy gun suddenly landed, apparently right on top of the nearest of our *Priests*, about fifty yards away. The large self-propelled gun, which carried a driver and five other men, was totally obscured by smoke and my first thought was that it had received a direct hit. In a flash my Troop Sergeant-Major, who at over 40 was by far the oldest man in our Battery, had rushed out into the smoke to see what the casualties and damage were. As the smoke cleared away we could see that it had fortunately not been a direct hit. The crew, though considerably shaken, were unhurt, as was the equipment.

Shortly after that an officer of 93 Battery was sent up the valley to do some forward spotting. Sadly, he never returned. The Japanese had brought in fresh troops to make a determined stand, and a considerable battle had to be fought over the next two days. We had been fortunate in that up until now the Regiment had largely been involved in chasing a fleeing enemy. In the Shwemyo Gorge we had a taste of real war.

Eventually superior forces and equipment were too much even for the dogged courage of the Japanese. On 19th April our armoured group pushed on twenty miles down the road to Pyinmana, which was still strongly held by the enemy. We did not waste time attacking it: while we watched, our armoured bulldozer cleared a by-pass round the town and we went on another ten miles to Lewe airport. The next target was the substantial town of Toungoo. This was the headquarters of Lieutenant-General Ronda, commanding the Japanese 33rd Army, and it was full of Japanese troops. A full-scale operation was mounted to attack it, including heavy air-strikes and a programme of artillery fire, in which our Regiment was involved. The ground attack was to be by the 5th Division, who had been well behind our armoured spearhead on the road. These troops came up so fast that it was touch and go whether the airstrikes mounted by the RAF from far distant airfields could be halted in time to avoid hitting them as they entered Toungoo, on 22nd April. Our armoured group went straight on towards Oktwin and Pyu. On the way we were able to proceed a good deal faster than planned, with the result that when 94/95 Battery together with a small group of infantry and tanks stopped for the night the pilot of a British *Mosquito* plane thought we must be Japanese. He strafed our position with his machine guns, killing one of the Royal West Kents and wounding another. When he came round to do the same thing again I suggested to the Battery Commander that we should try firing a green light from a Véry pistol, though we had no such signal laid down in our instructions and in fact had never had occasion to use the one Véry pistol with which the Battery was supplied. Fortunately one of our Bombardiers, Ken Jackson (who after the War became a Lieutenant-Colonel and the most senior Instructor, in Gunnery in the British Army), remembered where the pistol and its cartridges were kept. The pilot of the *Mosquito* obviously understood our message, since he circled round once again without firing his guns at us and then flew away.

Continuing on our way south we came across some soldiers of the Indian National Army, who had been persuaded by Subhas Chandra Bose to join the Japanese against the British. They wanted to surrender to me, but I said that I hadn't time to bother with them and they had better wait for other British troops coming along behind.

We pressed on to Nyaunglebin, and then to Daik U. The Japanese had laid minefields which caught some of the leading tanks, and we had to wait while a way was cleared through them and an infantry battle was fought to dispose of the Japanese who had been left as an ambush. So, although we had been in the armoured group leading the column the whole way down from Meiktila, it was the infantry who now took the lead into Pegu, which was captured on 29th and 30th April. When our Battery drove into the city the first thing that assailed us was the stench from hundreds of Japanese corpses which were lying about all over the city. We were glad to pass straight on southwards towards Hlegu, on the way to Rangoon. Here and there were corpses on the road, one of a young Burmese civilian. At one point I saw the body of a Burmese tied to a tree, with bayonet wounds all over him. Why he had been treated like this, we never learned.

Suddenly, on 1st May, the monsoon broke, a couple of weeks earlier than we expected. Up until now, the one thing we had never had to worry about since entering Burma had been the weather, since our whole campaign had been carefully planned to fit into the dry season. Now all that was changed. Since we had been on reduced rations, consisting mostly of tinned cheese, tinned brisling, bully beef stew and shakapura biscuits, with some of the hated American K rations, plus tea and condensed milk, most of us had malnutrition scabs on our arms, not to mention dhobi's itch (*tinea cruris*) through not being able to wash our clothes. These things all became more noticeable as the rain beat mercilessly down.

The Japanese must have been finding the monsoon an even greater problem, since they were now in total retreat. We could see the great beacon, blazing night and day, which they had built on the mountains to the east of Pegu, to mark the exit route to Thailand. All their administrative arrangements had broken down, and each man had to look after himself and make his escape as best he could. Our guns were given targets all round the compass, harassing what was left of the enemy units on every side of us.

As we approached Hlegu, only 28 miles from Rangoon, we learned that our destination had already been taken by forces landed from the sea. Naturally there was a sense of anticlimax. We would have liked at least to have been permitted to carry straight on and join them, but instead we were ordered back to Pegu where we were billeted in a number of houses in the deserted town. Fortunately the corpses and the worst debris from the capture of the city had been cleared away. While we were resting in Pegu we heard the news from the BBC that the War in Europe had officially ended. Japan, of course, was still fighting on.

Soon we were moved down the road to Mingladon, a suburb of Rangoon close to the airport. My billet was in nice modern house which had been requisitioned from a Karen eye specialist. He, like most of the Karen tribe, was very pro-British and a Christian. He and his wife called to see that we had everything we needed, which we certainly had. After the last six months it was the height of luxury! (Where he and his family were having to live while we occupied their house I never found out!) After about three weeks, during which I never managed to visit the city of Rangoon, we finally moved down to the docks and boarded a troopship for Madras. Some sixty miles inland from there we were to spend the next three months preparing the guns and vehicles and ourselves for Operation Zipper, which was the landing from assault craft at Morib Beach in Malaya (twenty miles, as it happened, from my birthplace of K1ang) on September 9th 1945.

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