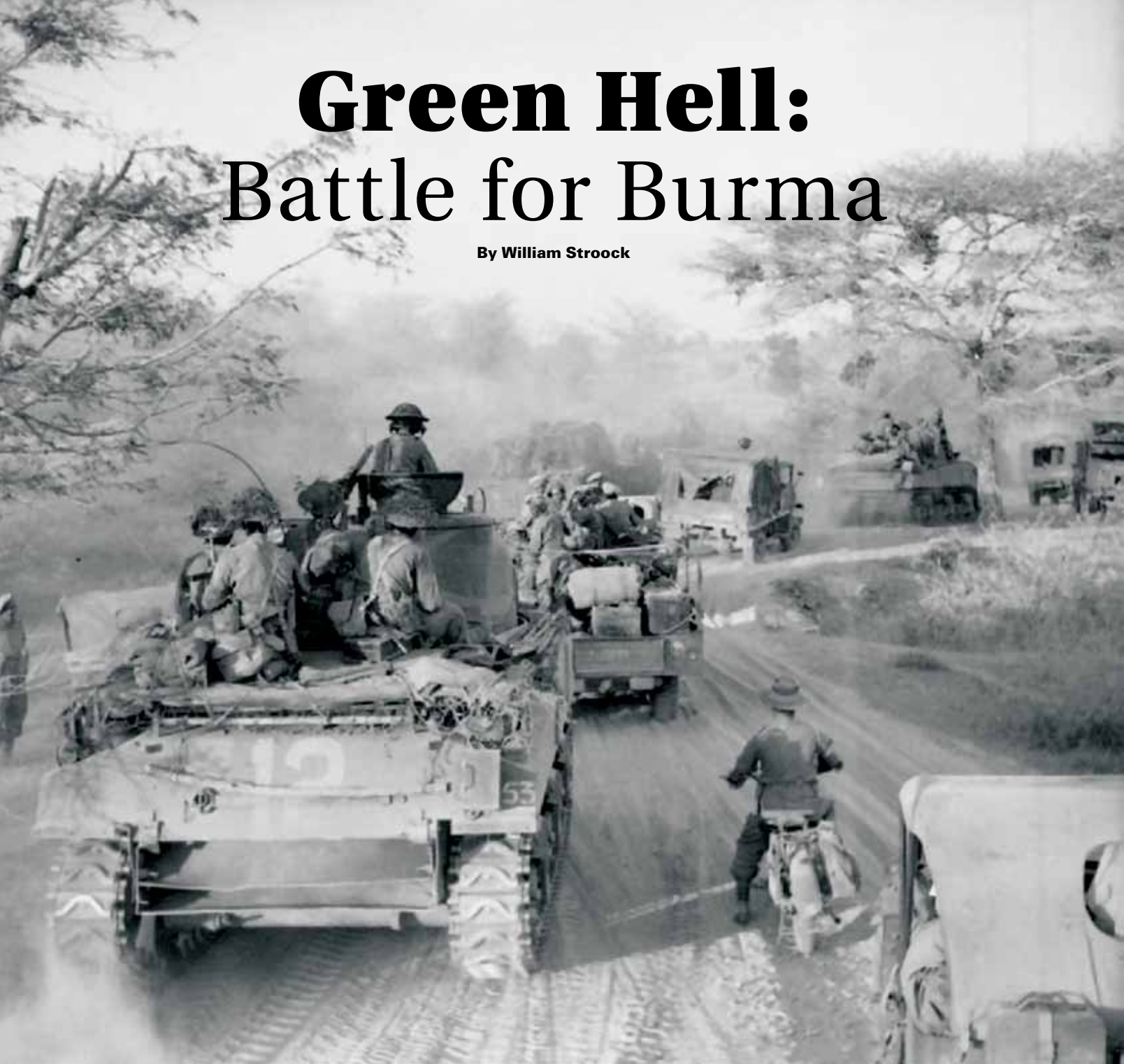


Green Hell: Battle for Burma

By William Stroock



An Indian Army mechanized column advancing on Meiktila.

Background

By the end of May 1942, five Japanese divisions, the elite of that nation's army, had successfully advanced to occupy positions on the Burma/India border. Japanese *Fifteenth Army* had pushed a combined Anglo-Chinese force out of the country, taken the key cities of Rangoon and Mandalay and seized the all-important oil fields.

The *Fifteenth* then seemingly stood poised to strike at the heart of British imperial power in Asia: colonial India. Commanded by Gen. Shojiro Iida, *Fifteenth Army* had won through perseverance, *élan* and audacity. Time and again, when confronted by Allied troops the Japanese would pin them, then maneuver around and infiltrate behind them. Seeing their position rendered untenable, Allied commanders would withdraw

only to see the process repeated at their next position. Those tactics won battlefield victories and inflicted a psychological defeat on Allied troops, who became convinced they couldn't stand against the Japanese. The British army that staggered into India had suffered 13,000 casualties during its retreat. One division, *1st Burma Infantry*, was all but destroyed. The *Seventeenth Indian Division* had been worn to a nub. In



Gen. Renya Mutaguchi, commander of Japanese Fifteenth Army starting in 1943.

India they would find no respite. The border region was rife with anti-British activity—both protests and acts of sabotage—all in the face of seemingly imminent Japanese invasion. Worst of all, British authorities in India had made scant preparation to receive their bedraggled troops.

Even as he surveyed the remains of his defeated army, however, the British commander on the ground, Gen. William Slim, was planning for a counteroffensive to retake Burma from the Japanese. Despite the recent defeat, Slim actually had several advantages. By retreating into India the British had shortened their supply line. Reinforcements flooded in, including the *14th*, *20th* and *23rd Indian Divisions*. At the same time, with the defeat of Axis sympathizers in Iraq and Syria, RAF units were freed for transfer to India. As a result, Slim was able to take control of the skies from the Japanese.

Slim ordered a rigorous retraining program for all the units in India. Not only did his soldiers need to renew their skills, they also needed a new mindset. For example, he emphasized the importance of constant and aggressive patrolling. Commanders were admonished to avoid occupying long and narrow defensive lines, and instead take up hedgehog positions that were defensible all around. Most importantly—in light of the tactics that had been used by the Japanese in their advance through Burma—he emphasized the need to stay calm in regard to enemy infiltration. His order concerning that read: "All units must get used to having Japanese parties in the rear and, when this happens, regard not themselves, but the Japanese, as surrounded."



Arakan

By the middle of the summer of 1943, with the Japanese still content to remain passively on the border, Slim and Gen. Archibald Wavell, British Commander-in-Chief Asia, decided the time had come to mount a counteroffensive. The target would be Arakan, the coastal region dominated by Akyab Island and the Mayu peninsula. Taking Arakan would secure the southern flank and remove the Japanese threat to the important supply hub of Chittagong.

Slim considered using amphibious assaults to support a thrust down the peninsula, as well as Orde Wingate's fledgling *Chindit Brigade* of comman-

does to land behind Japanese lines. Due to a shortage of landing craft and an ingrained mistrust of special operations, however, Slim ultimately decided on a direct push down the Mayu peninsula. Led by *14th Indian Division*, the offensive began in December.

The *14th* made good initial progress, but as it moved down the peninsula, which was bisected by the Mayu Mountains, the advance slowed and then stalled. The troops tended to stay on the roads, and their commanders launched frontal attacks that the Japanese easily repelled. Communications between the columns on opposite sides of the mountains also proved difficult.

As the the advance slowed, several

reinforcement brigades were added to *14th Division* to try to aid in regaining momentum, until there were nine in all; however, that only worked to cause immense congestion on and behind the front line. Worse, the Japanese began to infiltrate behind the lead British units to launch battalion-sized attacks up and down the line.

By April the peninsula still hadn't been cleared and Japanese counterattacks had sapped the strength of *14th Indian Division* as well as the morale of its men. Fed up with the course of events, Slim fired the *14th*'s commander and replaced him with Gen. C. E. N. Lomax, who in turn overhauled the divisional staff and redeployed several brigades so as to better protect the flanks.

When the Japanese next struck, Lomax lured their force into a trap; though they were then able to cut their way back out. That was the final act of the Arakan campaign. Slim decided to cut his losses and pulled *14th Division* off the peninsula. Total casualties within the division were relatively paltry, with about 2,500 dead, but Slim was more concerned with the blow to morale. That again suffered greatly in the aftermath of the failed offensive.

Imphal

In March 1943, Gen. Renya Mutaguchi took command of Japanese *Fifteenth Army*. It still contained five divisions that occupied good defensive positions, though it faced potential threats from Arakan, Imphal and Yunnan. An aggressive commander, Mutaguchi determined to eliminate the greatest of those potentials, that from the British forces near Imphal. Accordingly, he planned an offensive with the goal of taking that place and thereby setting the stage for a further drive into India, which would be led by Indian Nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose and his *Liberation Army*. In that way, Mutaguchi hoped not only to secure Burma but to knock Britain out of the war in Asia altogether. The operation was to be codenamed U-GO (Operation C).

At the same time, Slim and Wavell believed they had finally assembled adequate forces and supplies for a major offensive into central Burma. *Fourth Corps* had been assembled on the central Imphal plain. It had *20th* and *17th Indian Divisions* in the south

and the *23rd* at Imphal itself along with the *254th Armoured Brigade*. As that corps prepared to attack, intelligence reports indicated the Japanese were also readying an offensive. Slim, as he came to understand the scale of the enemy attack, realized his force was outnumbered. He therefore made ready to conduct a fighting withdrawal. While he disliked surrendering terrain, falling back would shorten his supply line, which ran through Imphal north to Kohima, while also buying time for reinforcements to arrive.

Starting on 6 March 1944, pressed by Japanese *33rd Division* in the south, *17th Indian Division* conducted a fighting retreat along the road going back to Imphal. Though they were again unable to prevent the Japanese from infiltrating, this time nobody panicked. Instead, they held their ground or fought through Japanese blocking positions. Slim remarked the map showing British and Japanese interleaved positions along the road to Imphal looked like "Neapolitan Ice [cream]." In that manner *17th Division* retreated until it linked up with *23rd Division* just south of Imphal. Meanwhile the *23rd* had been gradually falling back in the face of the advance of Japanese *15th Division*.

As far as Slim was concerned the battle seemed to be going well, but then a crisis developed. His northern flank was held by the *Indian Parachute Brigade*, which occupied positions about 20 miles northeast at Ukhrul. The paratroops were pressed hard by Japanese *31st Division*, which—characteristically—got around their flank. Slim had anticipated that, but rather than march on Imphal those Japanese made for Kohima, which was Imphal's vital supply link. Slim hadn't prepared for that move, and scant forces were on hand to defend Kohima. Slim blamed himself for the unfolding catastrophe, later explaining: "I had badly underestimated [the potential] for large-scale, long-range infiltration."

Fortunately for Slim, reinforcements were by then becoming available. The *5th Indian Division* was on hand and one of its brigades, the *123rd*, was airlifted to Kohima. Then *23rd Brigade*, part of *3rd Indian Division*, was also flown into the battle area.

Throughout April, as the Japanese pressed on Kohima from the east, and slowly worked around to the north and drove on the town of Dianpur,



A present-day historical reenactor demonstrating what the veteran Japanese soldiers looked like as they prepared to defend their conquests in Burma.

The Indian Army

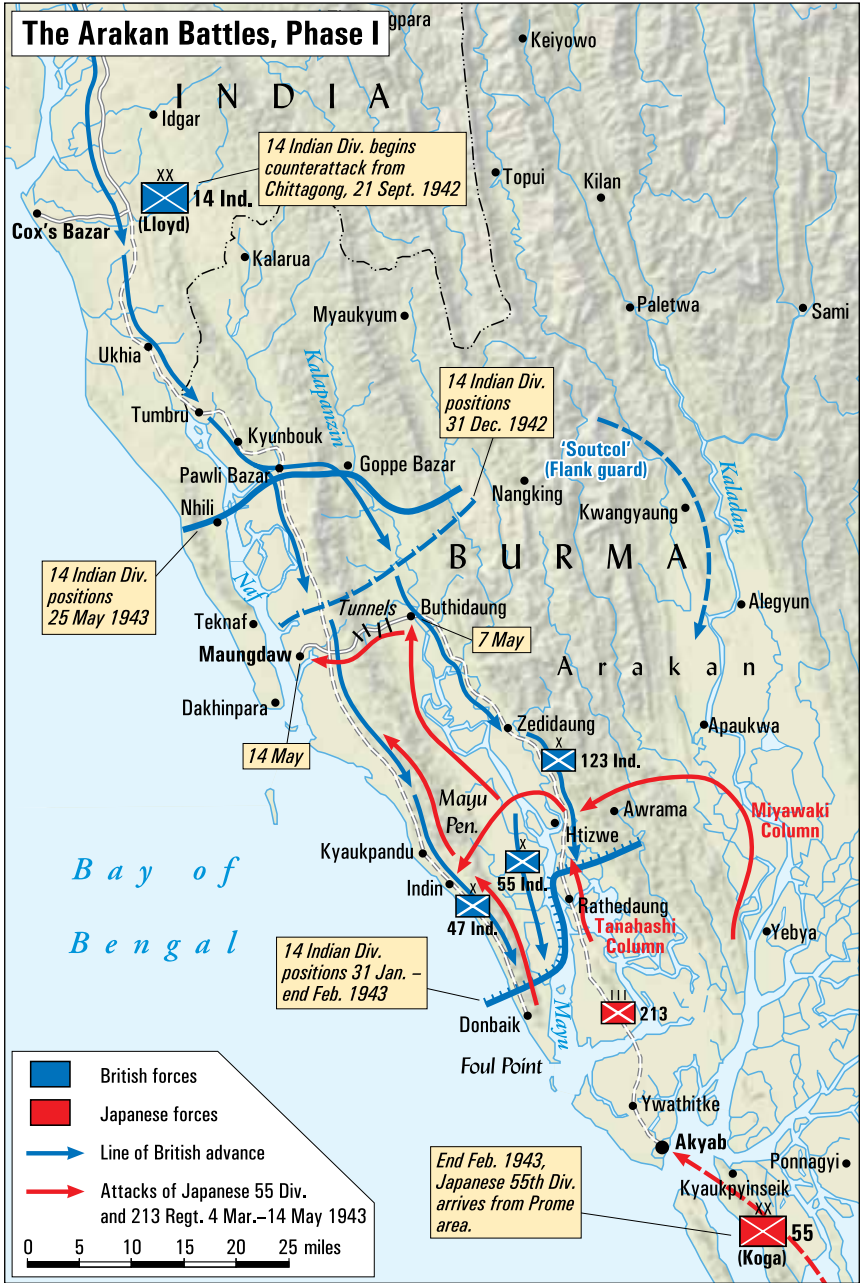
The typical Indian Army division had three brigades, each with three battalions. Normally two of those battalions would be Indian and one British. Supporting the infantry was four artillery regiments and various attached companies such as engineers and sappers. That wasn't so in all cases, however: the *81st West African* and *11th East African Divisions* were comprised entirely of units from African colonies, with battalions hailing from places such as Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Gambia and Uganda (see last sidebar).

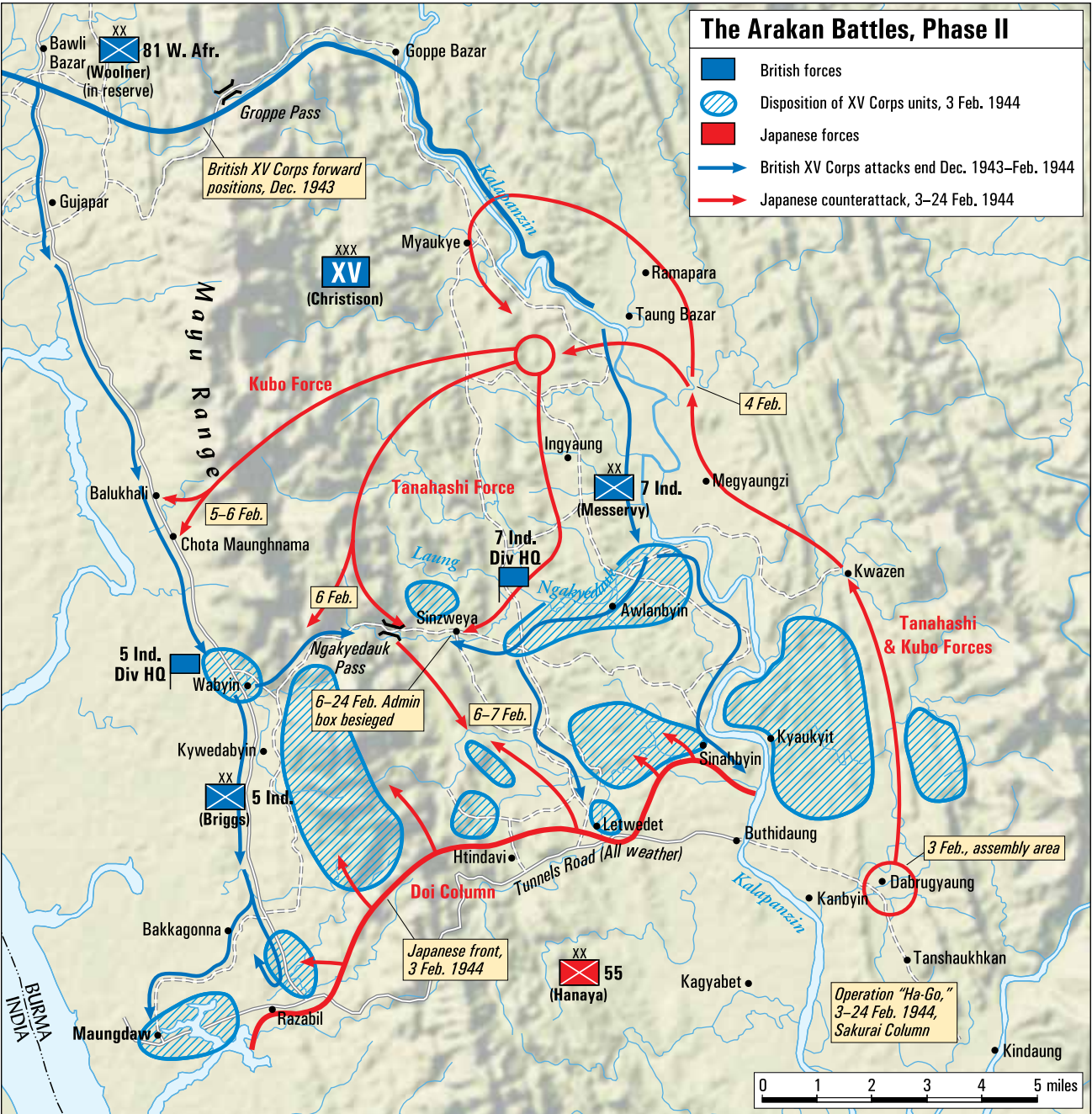
Slim's command became adept at the use of aerial resupply, jungle patrolling, and long-range penetration operations. Even so, Slim was sometimes skeptical of what he feared was turning into some of his units' over-specialization in those areas. He wrote: "I came firmly to the conclusion that such formations, trained, equipped and mentally adjusted for one kind of operation only, were wasteful. They did not give, militarily, a worthwhile return for the resources in men, material and time they absorbed."

While every division of the "Indian Army" was commanded by a British general, thousands of colonials—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Gurhka—rose through the ranks and became officers. Many of those men would go on to command the army of independent India after the war. Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, as just one example, commanded a company within *17th Division*. Later he was the Indian army's chief of staff, and planned the successful invasion of East Pakistan in the 1971 war. ★

those two brigades delayed them and whittled them down. Meanwhile, *2nd Indian Infantry Division* was moved up from central India. Slim fed that unit into the fight for Kohima, and in late April it spearheaded his counterattack. While that effort proved unable to push back the Japanese, it did further sap their strength.

Mutaguchi stubbornly refused to allow his divisions to pull back, so they fought on in place despite mounting losses. By 5 May, Slim could report the front was "stabilized" and the threat to Kohima had been eliminated. By the beginning of June he wrote: "On the Kohima front the enemy was breaking and pulling out as best he could."





West African officers in the Indian Army.

Between those two reports, Japanese 15th and 33rd Divisions had launched several assaults in an effort to break onto the Imphal plain. They were bloodily repulsed each time, though some elements managed to infiltrate around Allied positions. Even so, the British had clearly stopped the Japanese advance and were finally in a position to begin the reconquest of Burma.

Long Cloth & Thursday

The British reconquest of Burma had actually begun during the struggle for Imphal. That effort was led by Gen.

Orde Wingate, an eccentric officer with unorthodox (some would say revolutionary) operational ideas. He believed that, through the aggressive use of all aspects of airpower, the Allies could take the war quickly and deeply into Japanese territory. In 1943 he'd successfully led a brigade-sized "Long Range Penetration Group" on a raid deep into Japanese territory. While Operation Long Cloth, as it was codenamed, did little long-term damage to the Japanese, the raid proved that Allied forces, supplied by air, could march into and back out of Japanese-occupied Burma. The raid made Wingate a darling of the media and a favorite of Churchill's.

Wingate's fame and adulation gave him considerable power in the theater, and he exploited it. He followed up Long Cloth with the much more ambitious Operation Thursday. By then numbering six brigades, his 3rd Indian

Stilwell's Chinese Elite

Over the course of their own civil war and the Japanese invasion, Chinese Nationalist soldiers earned a general reputation for being badly trained, poorly disciplined and clumsily led. That wasn't true, however, of the Chinese force fighting under the command of Gen. Stilwell in Burma. Those American-trained Chinese became the best soldiers in the entire Nationalist Army. Some 31,000 of them—refugees from the original defeat in Burma, as well as reinforcements flown in by Chiang Kai Shek—were retrained in India and given instruction in jungle warfare.

When Stilwell began the push down the Hukawng Valley in 1944, spearheading the effort were two Chinese divisions, the 22nd under Gen. Liao Yao-hsing, and the 38th and Gen. Sun Li-Jem. Sun had attended the Virginia Military Institute, and he would later fight well in China against the communists. Slim thought highly of him, writing: "I found him a good tactician, cool in action, very aggressively minded, and, in my dealings with him, completely straight-forward." ★

"Chindit" Division (Chindit is the Burmese word for lion) would airlift into northern Burma and there engage Japanese 18th and 53rd Divisions, eventually taking Myitkyina, the crucial

rail hub the liberation of which would open the road to China. The Chindits would then hunker down to fight off the expected Japanese counterattack. On the operation's left (north)

