

FIELD MARSHAL WILLIAM SLIM AND THE POWER OF LEADERSHIP

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Military History

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FREDERICK A. BAILLERGEON, LTC (Retired), USA
B.A., Ferris State University, Big Rapids, Michigan, 1981
M.S.A. Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, Michigan, 1997

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Name of Candidate: LTC (Retired) Frederick A. Baillergeon

Thesis Title: Field Marshal William Slim and the Power of Leadership

Approved by:

_____, Thesis Committee Chair
John R. Kennedy, M.M.A.S.

_____, Member
Jackie D. Kem, Ph.D.

_____, Member
Robert J. Rielly, M.A.

Accepted this 17th day of June 2005 by:

_____, Director, Graduate Degree Programs
Robert F. Baumann, Ph.D.

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

FIELD MARSHAL WILLIAM SLIM AND THE POWER OF LEADERSHIP, by
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On 15 January 1942 the Japanese invaded Burma. Within months, the Japanese occupied the country and forced the Allied forces to conduct a brutal retreat into neighboring India. During the next three and one half years, both forces continued to fight in a campaign with the Allied forces retaking Burma in May 1945. One of the principle figures in this turnaround of the Allied Force was Field Marshal William Slim. During the Burma Campaign Slim served in several key leadership positions culminating as the 14 Army Commander. This focus of this study is to determine the role Slim played in the reconquest of Burma. Specifically, how did Field Marshal William Slim's organizational leadership actions (as defined in the U.S. Army leadership manual, FM 22-100) while serving as the 14 Army Commander, contribute to the Allies reconquest of Burma during World War II? It is hoped that the findings of this study will be of value to leaders of all levels currently fighting the Global War on Terrorism.

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CHAPTER 1

FIELD MARSHAL WILLIAM SLIM

OPPORTUNITIES AND LESSONS LEARNED (1891-1942)

To critically analyze a specific period in one's life or career, it is necessary to review their past. This is especially true in analyzing military leadership. There are many factors that influence a person's leadership ability, style, and philosophy. These include family, religion, education, relationships with others, and prior experience and opportunities. In the case of Field Marshal William Slim, all of these factors influenced how he approached his leadership actions while commanding the British 14 Army during World War II's Burma Campaign. This chapter focuses on these factors and how they combined to shape Slim's leadership style and philosophy prior to his assumption of command of the 14 Army.

In summarizing the life of William Slim from 1891 to 1942, two related concepts come to mind, opportunities, and lessons learned. These opportunities and subsequent lessons learned are critical and intriguing in three aspects. First, is Slim's ability to create opportunities for himself. This thesis highlights specific times where Slim's sheer determination and desire created opportunities seemingly unavailable to him. Second, is his good luck or fortune in having opportunities come to him. The old adage, being in the right place at the right time, applied for Slim a few key times in his life. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Slim seems to have made the most out of these opportunities. This chapter will stress the fact that win or lose, Slim learned from each opportunity and drew on these lessons to shape his leadership and decision-making during the Burma Campaign.

It is always interesting to discover that many historic military leaders had at an early age the ambition of becoming a Soldier. Once again, this is the case with Slim. From early on, his ambition was to become an officer. Perhaps, the spark for this interest was nightly reading by his father to him. In particular, Slim had great interest in a journal called *British Battles by Land and Sea*. This is reinforced by a comment he made later in his life when he was asked about when he first began taking an interest in soldiering and the impact of the journal. He states,

Almost every battle, from Saxons and Normans lambasting one with great axes at Hastings to Wolseley-helmeted British soldiers firing steady volleys into charging Fuzzy-Wuzzies in the Sudan, I was there. I pored over these pictures and through them I first began to daydream of myself as a soldier. In my childishly romantic visions I saw myself plunging forward in the most desperate assaults, while somewhere in the background bands played, men cheered and colours waved.¹

Unfortunately for Slim, it appeared his dream of becoming an officer would go unfulfilled. In relative terms, it was a matter of simple economics and social standing. First, Slim came from a family of very modest means. The traditional way of becoming an officer at the time was attendance at Sandhurst. Sandhurst's tuition was too expensive for his family and most, if not all slots, had heavy family influence, so this door was shut. Second, it was essential for an officer to have a private means of supplementing his officers pay, so he could experience a standard of living expected of an officer during the period. Again, his family could not afford any type of stipend to assist in a young British officer's lifestyle. It appeared the opportunity for an officer's commission was not feasible for Slim.

At the age of sixteen, Slim enrolled at the King Edward's School in Birmingham, England initially as a pupil-teacher and subsequently, as an uncertified elementary teacher. Again, economics had a huge impact on Slim's decision. During this period, his

father's business was doing poorly and another income was essential to make ends meet.

Slim summarizes the situation,

Our whole standard of living was drastically reduced. My brother was still a Medical Student at the University, and this at a time when all education beyond the elementary school had to be paid for. Obviously I must, and quickly, relieve my parents of some at least of the expense of supporting me, and of my education. The only job I could get immediately was in elementary school teaching, and so, without much thought and with no knowledge at all of teaching, I became a pupil-teacher at seventeen shillings and sixpence a week.²

After two years at King Edward, Slim left for the ever- popular greener pastures leaving academia. In 1910, he took a position as a junior clerk for a metal-tube maker. As Slim sarcastically put it, "I broke loose and entered industry."³ While working in this position, his first big opportunity surfaced. In 1912, with the help of friends, he joined the Birmingham University Officer's Training Corps. This was highly unusual since Slim was not a student at the University and was working full time. To put it in perspective, it would be comparable to a man working as an entry-level bookkeeper in Lawrence, Kansas and entering the University of Kansas Reserve Officer Training Corps even though he was not enrolled in the College.

Slim quickly took to "soldiering" and shortly achieved the rank of Lance-Corporal in the British Reserves. While attending training and serving with the reserves, opportunity again surfaced for Slim in 1914. However, this time it was his first experience in being at the right place at the right time. As the date suggests, World War I was at the doorstep and came unexpectedly to many nations, including Great Britain. Consequently, the ranks were short in the British Army and the demand was great for leaders at all levels. Filling one of these shortages was William Slim, who in August

1914 became a Second Lieutenant in Kitchener's Army with a posting to the Royal Warshickshire Regiment. Slim's dream had now turned to reality.

The reality for Slim saw him arrive on the Gallipoli Peninsula in North West Turkey in June 1915. Although Slim was a Second Lieutenant in rank, he came to his platoon with valuable skills and leadership traits gained from his civilian experiences. These included the ability to relate and motivate various types of people (obtained during his time as a teacher and working in industry) and a contagious optimism, which shone even in the most difficult circumstances (a trait that matured through the difficulty of Slim's childhood and early adult years).

Unfortunately, for Slim, this advanced seasoning did not shield him from the dangers of the battlefield. On 9 August 1915, he was wounded severely in the shoulder while leading his men in an attack against an enemy fighting position located on the crest of a hill. After being evacuated, Slim found himself in front of a doctor who did not appear overly optimistic about Slim's future. The doctor stated, "You're finished with soldiering for good."⁴ The doctor's recommendation was to have major surgery on his shoulder, which in all likelihood would then leave Slim with little shoulder mobility for the future and an almost certain medical discharge. Years later, Slim recalled his thoughts when he heard the doctor's ominous comment about his future, "I have known since what it is to lose battles, but I have never suffered so morale-shattering a defeat as that."⁵

Slim needed some moral support and found it from another doctor who was assisting in his care. This doctor was emphatic that Slim should not have the surgery. He believed that there were other courses of action available to Slim if he went back to England. Spurred by the doctor's optimism, Slim fought against the surgery with the

hospital officials and convinced them that convalescence to England would be best for him.

Slim began an extensive rehabilitation period and through his determination proved the optimistic doctor right. Amazingly, a man who was so close to being medically discharged was now prepared to lead Soldiers again. With a healed shoulder, he arrived at a holding unit in England anxiously awaiting reassignment back to the front. This opportunity arose in February 1916 when he joined his old unit as a newly promoted captain.

The Royal Warshickshire Regiment now found itself fighting in the Mesopotamian campaign near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Slim soon took command of a company and led it in intense fighting. In one particular battle, Slim was shot in the arm, yet continued to effectively lead his company. For this action, he received the British Military Cross, awarded for valor in the face of the enemy.⁶ After some relatively minor surgery (if any surgery is minor), he returned to his unit in different staff roles and served throughout the rest of World War I in Mesopotamia.

With the close of the war, Slim had much to reflect on and learned many lessons that he would hold close to him in the future. Fellow Soldier and author Lieutenant General Sir Geoffrey Evans best summarizes the effect World War I had on Slim. Evans stated:

He had learnt how to handle men and get the most out of them at all times; he had seen the ghastly waste of life through sending men on valueless raids, ostensibly to maintain morale, and the enormous casualties resulting from fruitless attacks to capture ground of no tactical importance; he had realized, too, that if regimental officers and their men are to give of their best, they must have the fullest information their commanders can give them without prejudicing security.⁷

This opportunity left a lasting impact on Slim and shaped his leadership philosophy for the remainder of his career.

One can categorize the inter-war years for Slim as a period of self-growth and a time when his reputation began to grow in the eyes of his leaders and peers. Slim began this period by being reassigned to India following the war. During the next three years, he held a variety of staff positions. His excellence in staff work enabled him to get a promotion to major, but he was not enthralled with the work. When asked about staff work in general he stated, “It’s an appallingly dull existence--I’m reduced to reading Shaw to keep awake.”⁸ During these waking moments, Slim determined he would pursue a transfer to the elite Gurkhas.

Much like an officer today, Slim began a dialogue with the personnel officers to request reassignment. There appeared to be much reluctance to send Slim to the Gurkhas. The personnel officers back in England felt the assignment was not in the best interest of the Army and the officer. Just when it appeared Slim’s career would go another path, a reversal of plans occurred. It is unclear what changed the personnel officer’s mind, but Slim would get his wish.

On 27 March 1920, Slim obtained another important opportunity, when he joined the 1 Battalion, 6 Gurkha Rifle Regiment. Although he lost a grade of rank to captain to fill the billet, Slim felt fortunate and proud to be part of the unit. His admiration for the unit is felt in the following comments he made years later,

I spent many of the happiest, and from a military point of view the most valuable, years of my life in the Regiment. The Almighty created in the Gurkha an ideal infantryman, indeed an ideal Rifleman, brave, tough, patient, adaptable, skilled in field-craft, intensely proud of his military record and unswervingly loyal. Add to this his honesty in word and deed, his parade perfection, and his unquenchable

cheerfulness, then, service with Gurkhas is for any soldier an immense satisfaction. The Gurkha expects from his officers a standard as high as his own.⁹

Slim spent five years with the Gurkhas in a myriad of positions culminating in serving as the Battalion Adjutant. This last job was an extremely prestigious position within the Battalion. Unlike a traditional adjutant in today's U.S. Army, his responsibilities included planning, training and overseeing discipline issues, as well as administration. A later benefit of his time spent with the Gurkhas was the relationship developed with Soldiers he would work with throughout his career. Included in this group were two young captains (D. T. Cowan and J. B. Scott), who years later were division commanders under Slim when he commanded the BurCorps during the Burma Retreat in 1942.

Toward the end of his tour with the Gurkhas, Slim took the entrance exams to attend the British Staff Colleges. His marks were high enough to gain attendance to the Staff College in Quetta, India where he began studies in 1926. In all accounts, it appears he had a very successful year, although one faculty member did make a disparaging remark. He stated, "Could do very well, if he worked--which he did not."¹⁰

The faculty member did not stop Slim from graduating and he soon began an interesting assortment of positions until the start of World War II. These included serving four years in various staff jobs at the British Army Headquarters in India; three years as an instructor at the British Staff College in Camberly, England (Slim attended the other location in Quetta); attendance for one year at the British Imperial Defence College (a course founded to study the science of warfare--its civil, economic and diplomatic as well as purely military aspects);¹¹ a year of study in 1938 at Senior Officer's School located at Belgaum, India; a short stint as a Battalion Commander for the 2 Battalion, 7 Gurkha

Rifles; and culminated this period by returning to Belgaum to serve as the Commandant at the Senior Officers' School.¹²

It would be a disservice to this period of Slim's career to simply devote a paragraph listing a chronology of positions held. There are certainly some critical, as well as interesting aspects of this period, which had significant impact on Slim's decision-making and leadership actions during the Burma Campaign. Additionally, these aspects assist in giving a reader a better perspective of the man.

Slim spent an extensive portion of this period in the military education system. On the surface, it may appear that this much 'time away from troops' would stagnate his career. However, since little was occurring in the British Army at this time, it did not stifle his upward mobility. As a consequence, Slim's time spent in the classroom paid many dividends later in the upcoming years.

As an instructor, Slim quickly gained a reputation of excellence among his students, fellow instructors, and superior officers. A consensus opinion of his abilities is found by reading the following comment by Major-General Sir Charles Dunphie, a student of his during 1935-1936, Dunphie stated,

We had a most able and later highly distinguished batch of instructors and we were all of the opinion that Slim was one of the best. He tackled every subject in a down-to-earth manner and presented it in a simple, straightforward language. He also had the knack of making any lecture interesting by introducing enough of the personal side and by including a sufficient degree of humour. In the Mess he was always natural, affable and tremendously interesting on all kinds of subjects other than military. I don't think I have ever learned more from anybody.¹³

Slim's students took a great deal from him, but Slim took a great deal from them as well. First, the years spent teaching fine tuned Slim's oratory skills and just as importantly, his listening skills. This would serve him well in later commands. Second,

he again developed relationships and trust with many Soldiers he would lead on future battlefields. These relationships and trust proved critical time and again during the Burma Campaign.

Within the same period, Slim had the opportunity to attend the Imperial Defence College. This experience provided Slim many tangible benefits for use throughout the rest of his career and particularly in the Burma Campaign. These included: 1) A better understanding of joint operations, since this was the first school he attended that included navy and air force officers; 2) A forum to discuss warfighting with peers during a period where technology was making significant impacts; 3) A better perspective on how the military was tied into civil, economic, and diplomatic options for a nation-state. In total, they assisted him in obtaining a base of knowledge necessary to command at the corps and army level.

As Slim finished his studies, there were two significant milestones that he had not yet completed his military career. In 1938, at the age of 46, Slim was still a major and still had not commanded at the battalion level. During that year, a promotion board was held in which Slim was eligible. The board was mixed about Slim's potential and some members felt he may just be too old and felt he should be passed over for promotion. It came down to the final voting member who swung the vote in favor of Slim.¹⁴

Slim was now a lieutenant colonel and was in search of a battalion command. That opportunity came with the Gurkhas, but not with his old battalion (1 Battalion 16 Gurkha Rifles) Slim desperately desired to command.¹⁵ Slim took the colors of 2 Battalion, 7 Gurkha Rifles in early 1938. From all accounts, it appears this assignment

was Slim's least favorite. Slim's biographer, Ronald Lewin, summarizes the causes of his disenchantment in the following passage:

He was lonely and not entirely happy, partly because 2/7th was not 1/16th, partly because he had to pull the battalion together, and partly because he had to act as Garrison Commander of Shillong (the location of 2/7th), which involved responsibility for one other battalion and sundry extras, and also for providing assistance over such local problems as the native bazaar, whose staple industries were brothels and illicit stills.¹⁶

After this difficult command, Slim returned to the Senior Officers Course as Commandant during April 1939. This assignment proved to refresh Slim's spirits and gave him the opportunity to influence senior leaders attending the course. In the coming months, things would change dramatically for Slim, as well as the entire world, as another war was on the horizon.

Before moving to these events, there is one interesting footnote to the life of Slim. Beginning in the mid-1920s, Slim began writing short stories and articles under the pen name Anthony Mills.¹⁷ These stories covered a wide range of subjects and his writing style had the ability to keep the reader engaged. These writing skills paid huge dividends later in his military career, when the necessity for written communications increased as he moved to higher levels of command.

Although he certainly enjoyed writing, the primary reason was the desire to provide more income to his family. To put it bluntly, Slim had difficulty paying his bills until his promotion to lieutenant colonel. This predicament came about because officers at the lower ranks were not paid very well, he had two children to raise and educate, and primarily because his wife had been accustomed to a very high standard of living.¹⁸

Moving ahead again to the beginning of World War II, Slim had become much more aware of the politicking for jobs. World War II offered a key opportunity and Slim

wanted to take advantage of it. On 23 September 1939, he took command of the 10 Indian Brigade in Jhansi, India.

When Slim took command of the Brigade, it was a unit woefully short on all equipment and supplies. These shortages included no wireless sets, no armored fighting vehicles, no anti-aircraft or anti-tank guns and only a few obsolete automatic weapons. These shortages had a significant negative effect on morale. It was a unit totally unfit for war.¹⁹

Besides these logistical challenges, Slim had severe training issues as well. Within the Indian Army, the majority of doctrine and military thought was still based on the battlefields and lessons learned from the Boer War.²⁰ Truly, much had changed since its conclusion over forty years prior. Additionally, the 10 Indian Brigade's focus was to prepare for operations on the frontiers of India. As British involvement in World War II loomed on the horizon, this focus shifted to North Africa and concerns with Italy's desires.

Putting all these challenges together, Slim had an arduous task on his hands to prepare his unit for war. The situation he faced would be eerily similar to one he would find himself a few years later in Burma; the key difference was that the 10 Indian Brigade was not currently in combat. Since it was not in combat, Slim did have the key element of time on his side. Using his time effectively, he fully trained and equipped his brigade and a year later it was sent to Sudan to fight the Italians in the region.²¹

It has been said that individuals learn more from their defeats than from their victories. If this is true, then Slim's time spent in Sudan was a huge learning experience. Many of these lessons came from a single battle fought in Sudan in two adjacent small

towns called Gallabat and Metemma (see figure 1). What made this fight even more significant for Slim was the fact that it was his first tactical engagement as a commander above the company level.²² Additionally, the attack would be England's first significant action in World War II. This added to the pressure on Slim.

Gallabat and Metemma were critical to the British because the towns were in one of the few areas in Sudan still held by the Italians. The seizure of these areas for the British would facilitate future offensive operations to the north into Italian held Eritrea. The tactical task to seize the Gallabat-Metemma complex fell to Slim and his brigade.

Slim's unit faced many challenges in this task. Chief among these were that it was a heavily fortified area with an integrated obstacle plan, it possessed mutually supporting fighting positions, and the Italians currently had air superiority in the area.²³ The Italians had made good use of the advantages of the defender.

All of the advantages did not lie on the Italian side. The 10 Indian Brigade had some of its own, which if utilized properly could offset the strengths of the Italians. These included the availability of twelve tanks and superior field artillery in terms of both quality and quantity. The combination of the two multipliers gave Slim a big edge in firepower.²⁴ Additionally, the brigade had a well-trained intelligence and reconnaissance organization. Slim's challenge was to use these strengths to negate the advantages of his opponent.

As the battle unfolded, things went well initially for Slim. The town of Gallabat fell very quickly and the 10 Indian Brigade focused its attention on Metemma. The attack on Metemma was a complete disaster. At the beginning of the attack, Slim lost nine of his twelve tanks to mines, air, and friendly fire. These losses planted the seeds of

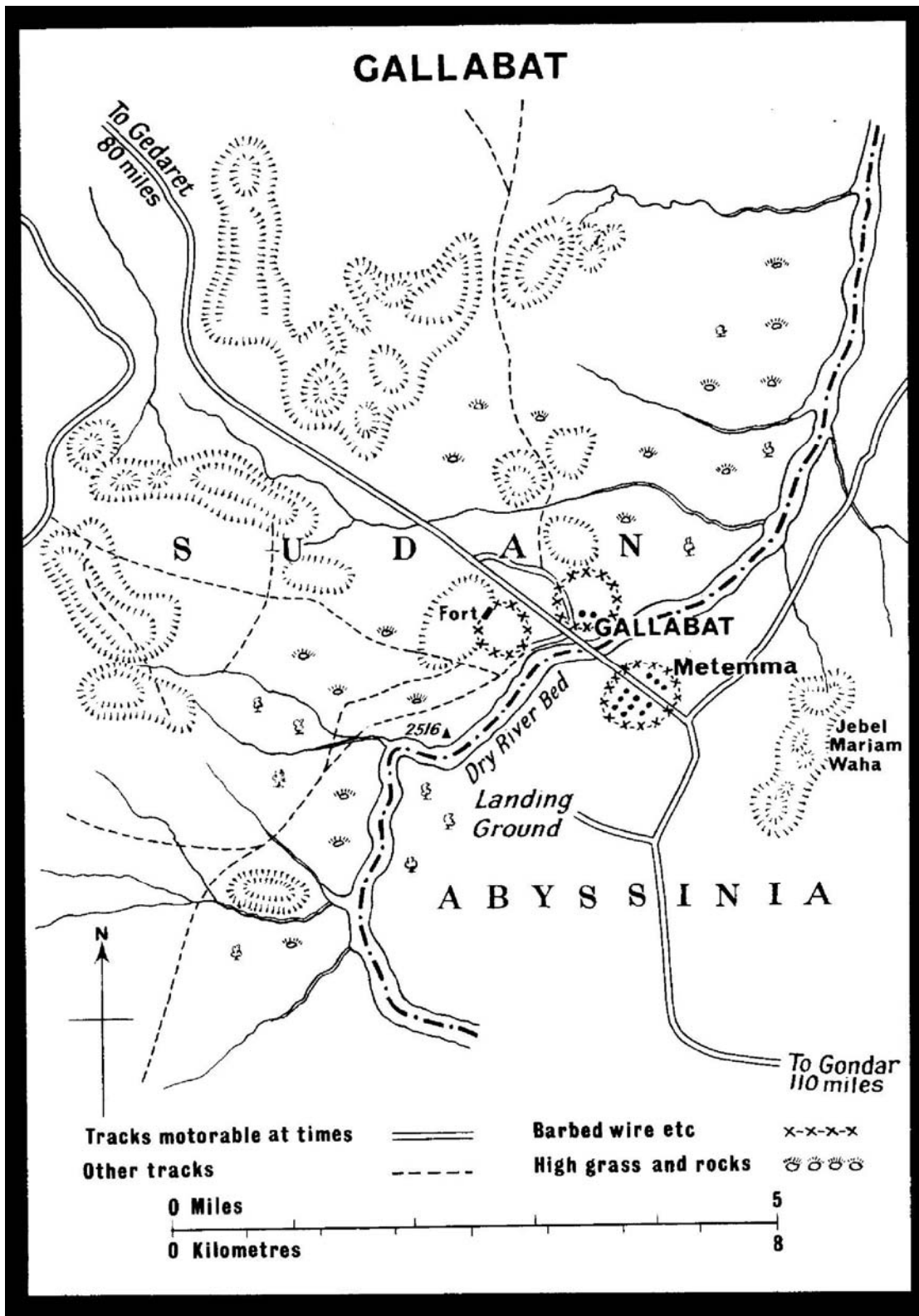


Figure 1. Map of Gallabat, 1940
 Source: Michael Calvert, *Slim* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 15.

indecision in Slim's mind and took away the original aggressiveness he possessed. As time went on, Slim decided to withdraw despite the fact that he still had substantial firepower (two battalions at full strength). Soon after that, the brigade relinquished control of Gallabat and fell back into positions where they could reach the town with artillery and patrols. Thus, Slim's first fight as a brigade commander ended in defeat.²⁵

On the surface, Slim took many lessons learned from the battle that he would utilize in the future. First, were poor task organization decisions, which took away options from him during key times. Second, Slim kept his reserve too far back to influence the fight. When Slim needed more combat power, it was not there. Finally, Slim ordered a withdrawal of his brigade despite the fact he had two battalions at nearly 100 % strength. He had lost focus of his mission and his capabilities and allowed doubt to cloud his command decisions.

The best summary of the impact of the battle on Slim comes from the man himself. In his own words, years later, he takes complete responsibility for the debacle at Gallabat-Metemma. He stated,

Like so many generals whose plans have gone wrong I could find plenty of excuses but only one reason--myself. When two courses of action were open to me, I had not chosen, as a good commander should, the bolder. I had taken counsel of my fears.²⁶

This comment gives tremendous insight into his ability to admit mistakes and failure. More importantly, it displays his intense desire to ensure he did not make the same mistake again.

Following Gallabat-Metemma, Slim continued to command, although there must have existed some confidence issues inside himself and between him and his men. In the middle of January 1941, he received his third wound in combat from an enemy air attack.

The wound proved serious enough to send him back to India for convalescence. It was there that opportunity again came his way in an interesting series of events.

After a period of recovery, Slim settled into a staff job preparing contingency plans for the possibility that Iraq would switch allegiance from the Allies to the Axis. On 2 May 1941, Iraqi forces loyal to the Axis attacked a British base near Basra. The British decided to send a large expeditionary force from India into Iraq under the command of Lieutenant General E.P. Quinan. Its mission was to squelch a potential Iraqi revolt and protect key oilfields in the country. Quinan needed a chief of staff and pulled Slim from his staff work. Soon after arriving in Iraq, the Commander of the 10 Indian Division became ill and shipped back to India. This created a vacancy or in Slim's case, an opportunity. This opportunity soon became a division command and promotion to Major General for Slim on 15 May 1941.²⁷

The 10 Indian Division was the perfect tonic for Slim to build his confidence and fine tune the skills he would utilize later. After a short period of time in command, Slim and the entire expeditionary force received orders to prepare his division to attack into Syria, a country influenced by Italy and the Vichy French. The key task Slim's unit would perform was to seize a vital bridge over the Euphrates River near a heavily fortified town named Deir-ez-Zor (see figure 2). The Vichy French defended the town and had a well-prepared defense. The seizure of the bridge was perhaps the decisive point of the operation since it would facilitate increasing the tempo and momentum of the attack into Syria.

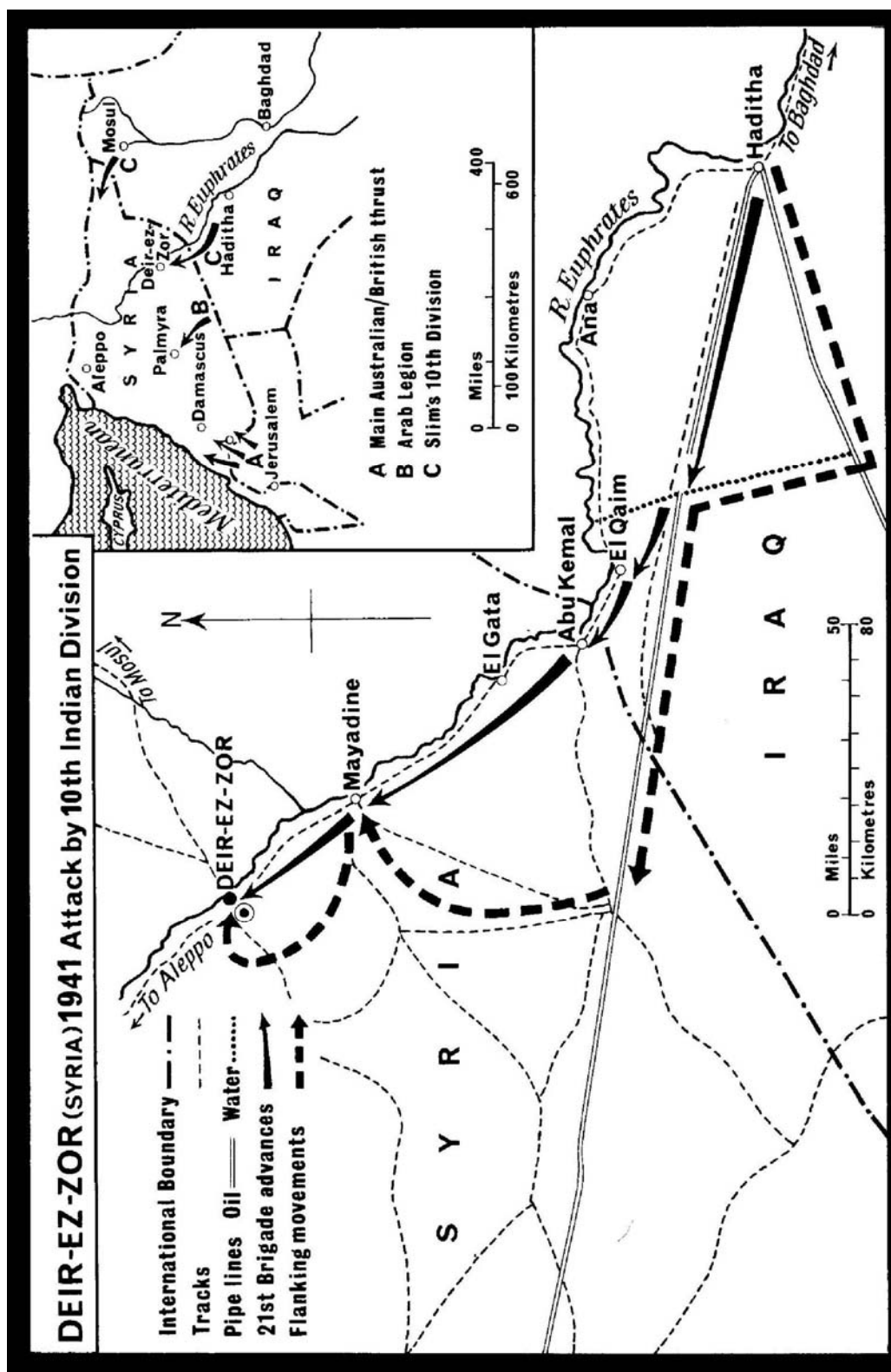


Figure 2. Map of Deir-ez-Zor, 1941

Source: Michael Calvert, *Slim* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 15.

As in the past, Slim's task would not be an easy one. From his current position, Deir-ez-Zor was roughly 200 miles away, all through harsh desert terrain. Since it was June, the weather was brutal with extreme drought and constant dust storms. Additionally, Slim's division had no combat experience and had many newly arrived Soldiers within its ranks.

Slim's plan was to have one brigade move to the south of the town and fix the enemy. He believed this would create the conditions for another brigade to envelop the town from the north. It was a plan that contained surprise and a flash of maneuver warfare. The difficult piece would be the division's movement to Deir-ez-Zor. Slim had to ensure his unit was physically, mentally, and logistically capable to conduct the attack after this difficult movement.

As the attack began, the 10 Indian Division had relatively few problems. Except for some encounters with enemy air, the movement towards attack positions went very smooth. Around mid day on 1 July 1941, the Division was within seven miles of Deir-ez-Zor poised to attack from the south and north according to the plan. In fact, things were going so well for the unit that Slim felt he could get some rest for the evening. He would let his brigade commanders control operations that evening. However, his plans of some well-earned uninterrupted sleep would not come to fruition.

Later that evening, Slim awoke to the news that the envelopment force did not have enough fuel left to accomplish the attack into Deir-ez-Zor. At first, he decided he would modify the objective of that brigade to accommodate its fuel problems. Slim drove to the brigade commander's location and after discussion, determined that the modified objective would not allow his division to accomplish its task and purpose. His decision

was to stay with the original plan and to take fuel from any available vehicle not necessary to the attack and give it to his main effort brigade.

Through much improvisation, the needed fuel got to the brigade. After filling its tanks, the division continued the attack and the plan worked to perfection. The enemy fled the town, left large supply stocks, and did not blow the bridge across the Euphrates. Slim could not ask for anything more.

The events at Deir-ez-Zor were a huge indicator of his ability to learn from his mistakes. These indicators included: (1) Unlike some of his earlier battles (particularly Gallabat), he did not lose sight of his task and purpose. At all times, he focused his forces on the bridge at Deir-ez-Zor. (2) Slim did not take counsel of his fears, although it appeared this might be the case when he wanted to modify the northern brigade's objective. However, after reassessing the situation with the brigade commander on the ground, Slim did not let "fear" enter into his final decision-making process. and (3) From planning to execution, Slim choose the bolder course of action. As stated earlier, Slim's attack on Deir-ez-Zor was innovative and contained a true element of surprise. Slim's use of the envelopment versus a straight frontal attack was truly the bolder course of action. Lewin best sums up the relationship between Slim and Deir-ez-Zor when he states, "From the point of view of Slim's development as a commander Deir-ez-Zor was of immeasurable importance."²⁸

Slim stayed in command for another seven months (ten months total) with the 10 Indian Division. The remainder of his command was fairly uneventful with little combat. The majority of the time was spent in preparing defenses and conducting rehearsals for various missions. In early March 1942 Slim received word he was to call Lieutenant

General Quinan at his headquarters. Quinan told Slim he would relinquish command and he should depart soonest for India. Slim must have thought there was another opportunity on the horizon.

Before moving to this next chapter in Slim's military career, it is necessary to review the important lessons and valuable skills he learned from 1891 to the beginning of 1942. First, Slim acquired an intense desire and determination to succeed in all endeavors. He additionally had the ability to spread these traits to his subordinates. Second, Slim's civilian jobs afforded him the chance to work with men of different income levels and social status. These jobs gave him an understanding of what motivated various people. Third, being a witness to the extreme loss of life in World War I, Slim developed a huge respect for human life. He vowed not to subject his men to missions involving senseless killing. Fourth, Slim's experience ingrained in him that a zero defects mentality could not exist (this applied especially to himself). He admitted his mistakes and shortcomings and learned from them. Fifth, Slim was battle tested and well-grounded in tactics. He learned the hard way that a commander must be bold in thought and in action. Finally, through civilian and military jobs, Slim acquired superb written and oral communication skills. Through these he was able to convey his humor, enthusiasm, and deep love for Soldiers. The combination of these lessons and skills would be pivotal in Slim's ability to handle his next opportunity and most difficult challenge yet.

¹Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standardbearer* (Hertfordshire, England: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 2.

²*Ibid.*, 8.

³*Ibid.*, 9.

- ⁴Ibid., 26.
- ⁵Ibid.
- ⁶Michael Calvert, *Slim* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 8.
- ⁷Geoffrey Evans, “Field Marshal The Viscount Slim” in Michael Carver, *The War Lords: Military Commanders of the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 376-377.
- ⁸Lewin, 35.
- ⁹Ibid., 37.
- ¹⁰Ibid., 46.
- ¹¹Calvert, 10.
- ¹²Lewin, 49.
- ¹³Geoffrey Evans, *Slim as Military Commander* (London: D. Van Nostrand, Inc., 1969), 28.
- ¹⁴Lewin, 60.
- ¹⁵Slim had served with 1st Battalion 16th Gurkha Rifles in the early 1920s.
- ¹⁶Lewin, 61.
- ¹⁷Slim came up with the pen name Mills, by simply reversing the letters of his last name.
- ¹⁸Ibid., 49.
- ¹⁹Calvert, 12.
- ²⁰Ibid., 11.
- ²¹Calvert, 11.
- ²²Duncan Anderson, “Slim” in John Keegan, *Churchill’s Generals* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 304.
- ²³Evans, 35.
- ²⁴Lewin, 65.
- ²⁵Evans, 41.

²⁶Geoffrey Evans, “Field-Marshal The Viscount Slim,” 378.

²⁷Anderson, 305.

²⁸Lewin, 76.

CHAPTER 2

THE BURMA CAMPAIGN: RETREAT

15 JANUARY-15 MAY 1942

On 15 January 1942, Japan began a ground invasion of Burma and within months had firm control of the country. Before answering the question of “how” it succeeded so quickly, it is necessary to answer “why” a campaign was fought there to begin with. After all, it would be safe to say that Burma was not on the scope of any of the world’s major powers prior to the start of World War II. It was a country geographically isolated by thick jungles and malaria-infested mountain ranges on its east, west, and north borders.¹ Besides some oil reserves, the country possessed few natural resources and had little strategic value. Perhaps, Slim gives the best description of Burma when he states, “It could fairly be described as some of the world’s worst country, breeding the world’s worst diseases, and having for half the year at least the world’s worst climate.”² It was an area that no one desired to fight for, yet it lured the countries of Japan, England, the United States, and China into some of the war’s most difficult fighting. What brought this complete reversal of thought for these countries and made Burma another battleground for the war?

At the onset of World War II, the Japanese had visions for East Asia, but discussions concerning Burma were really an afterthought. Their original plan called for establishing a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. To do this, they would establish a strong defensive perimeter from the Kuriles, through the landmasses of Wake Island, the Marshall and Gilbert Islands, the Bismark Archipelago, New Guinea, Timor, Java and Malaya and then to the southern tip of Burma (see figure 3). In order to form the

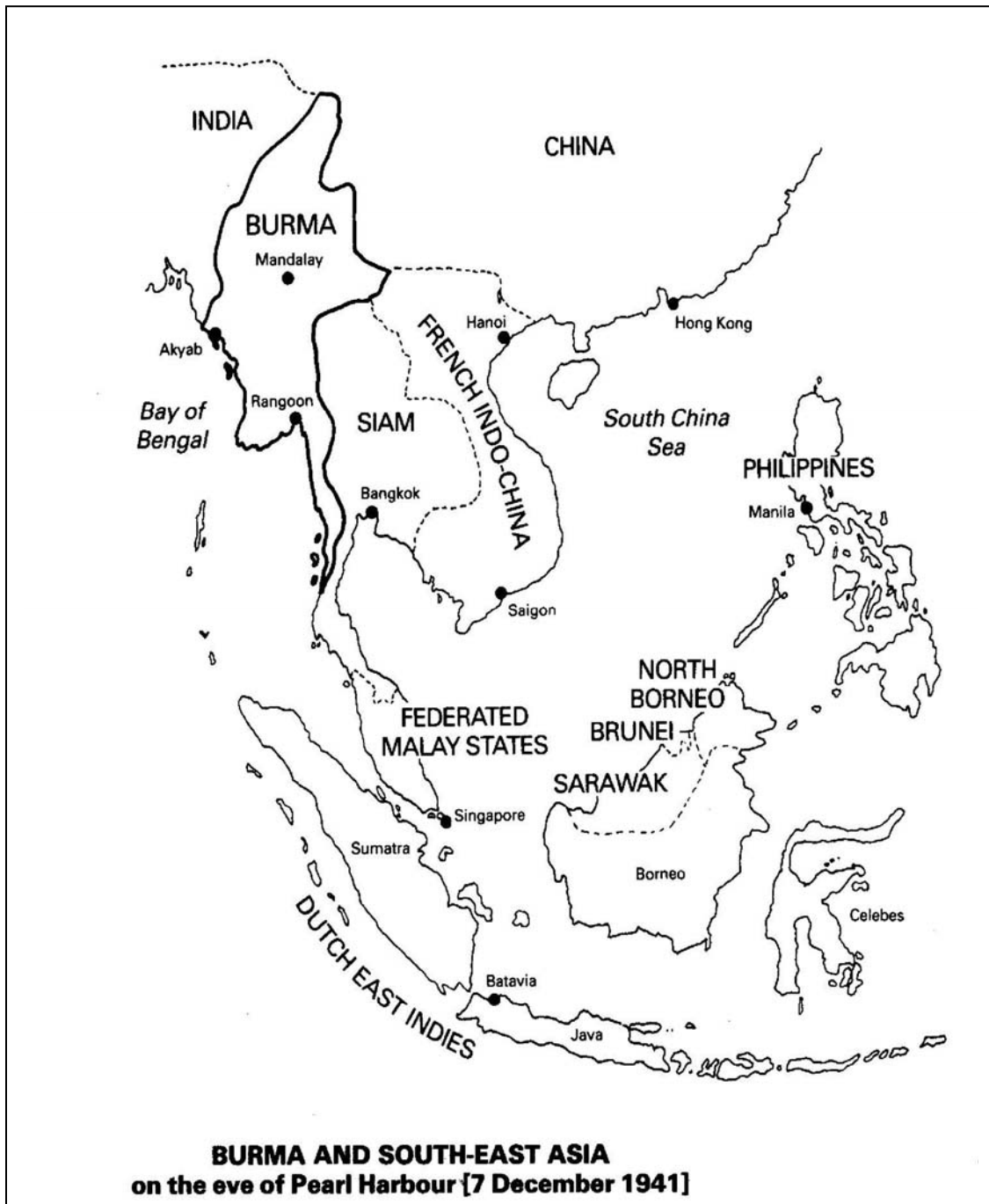


Figure 3. Burma and South-East Asia, December 1941
 Source: Michael Hickey, *The Unforgettable Army: Slim's XIVth Army in Burma* (Kent, England: Spellmount, Ltd., 1992), 76.

perimeter, Japan would need to seize the Philippines, the Netherlands East Indies, Malaya, Siam, and southern Burma.

Japan believed the establishment of this perimeter was critical. The perimeter, if sufficiently linked together, would deny Allied forces the ability to penetrate the overall defense and take these countries back from Japan. The assumption made by the Japanese was that after a period of failed attempts to penetrate the defense, the Allied will to fight would falter and they would simply give up and accept Japan's occupation of the region.³ This overall plan was ambitious, but the Japanese felt they possessed sufficient military strength to succeed.

For their plan, Burma was not as significant as most of the other countries in the region. The Japanese felt a complete conquest of Burma was not necessary. Japan believed that any British forces occupying Burma would stage a counterattack from the southern tip of Burma once Japan conquered the Malay Peninsula.⁴ With this belief, the Japanese could take this option away by first fixing the British in southern Burma or if necessary, by seizing the area.

As Japan's East Asia plan unfolded during 1941, two critical situations entered the equation affecting Japan's overall end state for Burma. First, the Japanese became more and more frustrated in their inability to defeat the Chinese and take control of the country. Despite the fact that they controlled the coastline of China and occupied several key cities within the country, they could not claim victory against their opponent. Second, in July of that year, the United States, who was supplying the Chinese with equipment, implemented a form of economic sanctions against Japan. The United States decided to impose a ban on oil shipments to Japan. This decision was significant to Japan since it

had only six months of oil reserves. The United States ban could truly affect the logistical capabilities of Japan.⁵

These situations dramatically altered the importance the Japanese placed on Burma. The seizure of Burma in its entirety now became a key objective of Japan for several reasons. First, Burma's location in relation to China made it appealing to use as another front in its fight with the Chinese. Second, Burma's one key natural resource, oil, was now a prime commodity needed by the Japanese based on American actions.

The need to conquer Burma was further accentuated by a new expanded Japanese end state in East Asia. They believed the occupation of Burma would create anarchy in India and ignite war between the Indian populace and the British ruling party. This fighting could afford Japan an opportunity for the potential conquest of India. The combination of these factors influenced the decision to conduct an attack to seize the entire country of Burma.

It has been said many times that for every action there is an opposite reaction. This certainly rang true when Japan attacked Burma. This offensive action precipitated the entry of Great Britain and the United States, thus joining China in war against Japan. While China was fighting for its survival, England and the United States each had vastly different reasons for fighting against Japan.

In terms of Great Britain, an attack on Burma was in essence an attack on the British Empire. Since the end of World War I, England had stationed Soldiers in Burma. Their role in Burma was to protect interests in the Empire and in particular provide eastern security for one of their biggest jewels in the Empire, India. Although Burma had some importance to Britain, its main concern was India. This concern intensified when

Japan began publicizing the slogan “Asia for Asians” as it began its East Asia Campaign. As Japanese troops crossed into Burma, the leaders of England must have assumed India was next. They would now fight for their interests, but were they prepared? The thesis will answer that question shortly.

With the attack of Pearl Harbor firmly entrenched in the hearts and minds of Americans, the country was at war with Japan. When the Japanese attacked into Burma a month after Pearl Harbor, the United States had to determine what benefits involvement in Burma would bring to its overall strategy of defeating the Japanese. After some discussion, American leadership decided involvement in Burma was necessary for two reasons. The first reason was it needed to ensure China would stay in the fight against Japan.⁶ This was only possible if the Allies could keep supplies coming into China and show the Chinese a strong commitment. In the case of supplies, the only viable route into China was from the south through Burma. The second reason was that the more Japanese divisions that were tied up fighting in Burma, the less Japan would have available in the Pacific.⁷ To ensure this, the United States would support the Allies, particularly the Chinese, with added equipment, military advisors and expertise, and eventually Soldiers.

The above paragraphs provided a brief analysis of what the stakes and motives were for each country in Burma. In fact, most historians expand the stakes into the countries of China and India, since they were so interrelated. Consequently, they call the entire campaign the China-Burma-India (CBI) Campaign. These motives, especially on the Allied side would cause political difficulty between the partners and affect military decisions throughout the entire campaign. With the stakes in place, the focus of the

remainder of the chapter is to discuss the execution of the early period of the campaign and the role Slim played in it.

When the Japanese began their invasion of Burma, they encountered a British force totally unprepared for war. Although British leadership understood the importance of Burma, they gave it an extremely low priority militarily.⁸ At the outbreak of war with Japan, the forces defending Burma consisted of basically two divisions with the total composition consisting of two British and four Indian battalions, eight Burma Rifle battalions (Burmese Soldiers), and three Indian mountain artillery batteries.⁹ The British would augment their ground forces with an air force, which they believed could stop or at least greatly delay any Japanese forces attacking into Burma.¹⁰ At this period of the campaign, the British were extremely confident in their ability to defeat the Japanese.

In terms of sheer numbers, this force may have been capable of defending Burma. Unfortunately, for the country of Burma, the condition of these troops was appalling.¹¹ The majority of the units were recently formed and poorly equipped.¹² They were not ready for war and the Japanese would soon make them pay dearly for their unpreparedness. Slim summarized the situation,

In Burma, our unpreparedness when the blow fell was extreme, and we paid for it. The basic error was that not only did few people in Burma, and no one outside it, expect that it would be attacked, but there was no clear or continuous decision as to who would be responsible for defence preparations or for its actual defence if it were attacked.¹³

The thirteenth of December 1941 marked the beginning of the Japanese attack into Burma (see figure 4). On this date, Japan started setting the conditions for their ground attack. At this time, they seized a British occupied airfield at Victoria Point, located on the absolute southern tip of Burma. With the airfield under their control, they

used it to stage their first air attacks on the strategic Burma port of Rangoon on 23 December 1941. While the air campaign continued, the Japanese moved two infantry divisions near the Thailand/Burma border. Despite the ground movement and the air attacks, the British still had virtually no information regarding the enemy. This was due to the fact that because of a lack of funds, no attempt had been made to place intelligence agents inside Thailand.¹⁴

With the conditions set and the British unsure on Japanese intentions, Japan launched the ground attack on 15 January 1942. From the beginning it was obvious the forces defending Burma were clearly overmatched in every category. The Japanese had conducted exhaustive planning and preparation for the attack and it was quickly apparent.

The Japanese quickly seized the initiative and put the Burma forces on their heels. One of the earliest encounters between the forces occurred in the battle of Dawas. As author James Lunt states, “It was a grim foretaste of the campaign to come.”¹⁵ Lunt further elaborates on the early Japanese strengths shown in the battle:

It contained the ingredients of all that made the Japanese such formidable opponents. The speed with which they seized the fleeting chance; the exploitation of every weakness; the ruthlessness with which they drove forward across terrain considered impassable; the skilful handling of their mortars; their stamina and let it be said, their courage.¹⁶

With these characteristics, the Japanese made huge advances on the ground and began threatening Rangoon, a true decisive point in seizing the entire country. While the Japanese were approaching Rangoon, their opponents still possessed little or no situational awareness. British military leaders, in particular General Archibald Wavell, were not seeing the same campaign unfold. Wavell was critical in this chain because at the time of the ground attack he assumed both the roles of the Commander-in Chief of

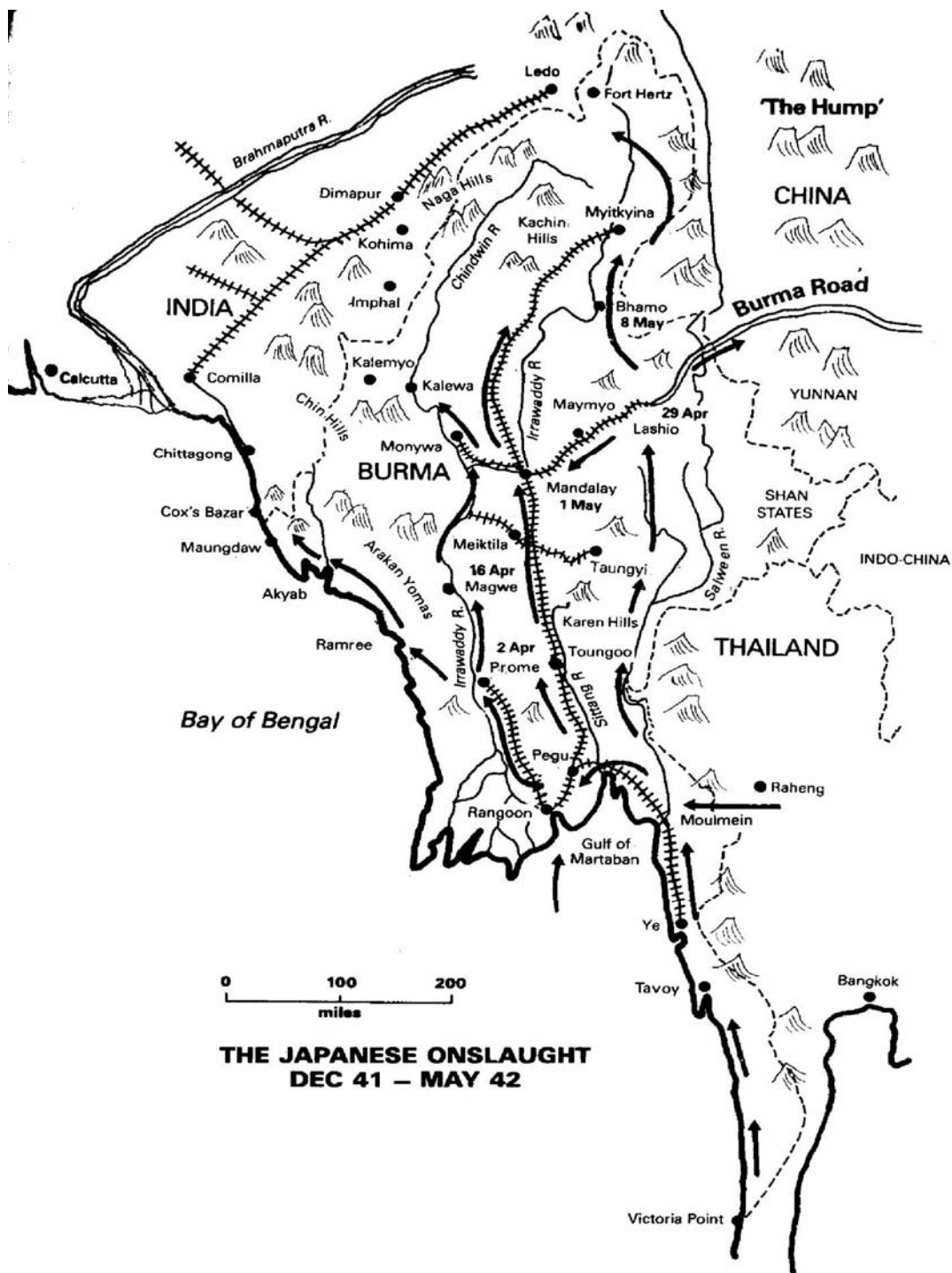


Figure 4. Japanese Onslaught, December 1941-May 1942
Source: Michael Hickey, *The Unforgettable Army: Slim's XIVth Army in Burma* (Kent, England: Spellmount, Ltd., 1992), 13.

British Forces in India and the Supreme Commander of the newly formed organization ABDACOM (American, British, Dutch and Australian Command), an alliance of countries with interests in the Southwest Pacific.

Despite the early chaos on the ground, Wavell saw the Japanese as no true threat in Burma. Soon after the start of the attack, Wavell visited Lieutenant-General Thomas Hutton, the Commander of British Forces in Burma. Wavell told him that Rangoon was not in any danger and a British offensive would quickly drive the Japanese back into Thailand.¹⁷ Wavell's offensive mentality is applauded, but his total lack of understanding of his enemy trumped his offensive spirit. He not only underrated his enemy, but also overrated his own troops.¹⁸ This was not a good combination for the defense of Burma.

British counterattacks found no success and on 15 February 1942, these forces began a series of withdrawals north toward Rangoon. On the withdrawal route laid the Sittang Bridge, which was the principal bridge across the Sittang River enroute to Rangoon. The commander on the ground, General John Smyth, the Commander of the British 17 Division had an extremely difficult decision to make regarding the bridge-whether to destroy the bridge and if so, when. General Davies put the decision in perspective, "If he blew the bridge he sacrificed the bulk of his division. If he failed to blow the bridge and it was secured intact by the enemy, the way to Rangoon lay open with nothing interposing."¹⁹

Smyth's original choice was to withdraw across the river and then decide about the bridge later. However, his commander, Hutton, overrode him and ordered him to fight on the enemy side of the bridge. What unfolded next has been termed by many British

historians as one of the most controversial decisions taken by a British general in World War II.²⁰

As was the case during the entire first part of the campaign, Smyth had no intelligence on Japanese locations. On 23 February 1942, he soon found the Japanese right on top of his men. Unfortunately two-thirds of his forces still had to cross the bridge. The time came when the decision had to be made. Smyth was the decision-maker! It is hard to imagine the immense pressure placed on the man. Pressure or not, he gave the word to blow the bridge stranding the majority of his combat power on the enemy side of the Sittang River. Most of his men somehow managed to make it across, but they left all their equipment to the Japanese. Premier Burma historian Louis Allen stated the importance of the action when he wrote, “The blowing of the Sittang Bridge with two brigades still on the wrong side of the river was the turning-point in the first Burma campaign.”²¹

The saga of the Sittang River was a critical point in the near-term future of Burma. It is also an excellent example of the importance of rivers throughout the entire campaign. The north-south flowing rivers so dominated movement laterally that they dominated the strategy of the Burma campaign and provided the main highways and lines of communication.²² This link between the Burma Rivers and strategy and tactics is constant throughout the Burma campaign.

Three days after the bridge was blown, the Japanese moved across the river and continued the pursuit of the 17 Division. As the Japanese advanced towards Rangoon, changes were made to the British command and control architecture. First, the ABDA Command was dissolved on or about 25 February. Wavell kept the position as the

Commander-In-Chief India. Second, Wavell, perhaps looking for a scapegoat for Sittang River, fired Hutton and replaced him with General Sir Harold Alexander, making him the Burma Army Commander.

In his first meeting with Alexander, Wavell gave him his initial verbal order. He told him, "The retention of Rangoon is a matter of vital importance to our position in the Far East and every effort must be made to hold it."²³ With that intent, Alexander determined his forces would conduct a counterattack at Pegu, just northeast of Rangoon.

On 5 March 1942 British Forces executed the counterattack with a brigade sized force and found only disaster. Within twenty-four hours, the British brigade commander and all three of the battalion commanders were killed. Alexander called the attack off and quickly decided to evacuate Rangoon. At this time, the Japanese had surrounded the entire city except for one road that headed north to Prome. Luck was on the side of the British. Alexander picked the right road and the Japanese did not see the British withdrawal. The two forces never met and for once something had gone the British way. However, Rangoon was lost and with it the key port of Burma. The significant result of losing Rangoon was supplies for the Allies must now come via India, which dramatically hindered logistical operations.

At this point in the chapter, the reader may inquire where is the subject of the thesis--Slim? As a refresher, at the conclusion of chapter one, the thesis highlighted that Slim gave up command of his division in early March in pursuit of another opportunity. This opportunity had its beginning when Alexander determined a corps commander was essential to fight the battle while he himself handled the many administrative and political problems of this complex war-zone.²⁴ The recommendation of Alexander's staff,

with heavy prodding from Alexander's two division commanders (Scott and Cowan) was Slim.²⁵

Alexander asked London for Slim and after the obligatory discussion period, he received his man. Slim was told to take a plane from Iraq to Mandalay, Burma. Slim stated, "I was still quite ignorant as to why I had been brought to Burma, and again no one seemed to enlighten me. My secret fear was that I was going to be told to take over the Chief of Staff to General Alexander in place of Hutton, who was going back to India."²⁶

Slim arrived in Mandalay on 12 March 1942. A day earlier, General Vinegar Joe Stilwell took command of the Chinese 5th and 6th Armies, presently located near Mandalay. It is an interesting coincidence that the two men would begin their impact within the theater almost simultaneously. In the next two years, these men would have a large effect on each other's lives.

Certainly, such an intriguing leader and interesting personality as Stilwell demands significant study in himself. For the purposes of this study, there are three pertinent aspects regarding Stilwell. First, is the myriad of titles Stilwell incurred during operations in the CBI Theater. These included commanding general of the U.S. Army in CBI, chief of staff to China's supreme commander (Chiang Kai-shek), commander of all Chinese forces operating in Burma, supervisor of the CBI lend-lease programs in China, and the U.S. representative on any war councils held in theater.²⁷ Second, are the additional responsibilities Stilwell held. Chief among these were maintaining the only supply route from Rangoon into China (called the Burma Road), training over two million Chinese Soldiers, setting up and overseeing the lend-lease air supply of China

across the treacherous Himalayan “Hump” from India, and planning and building a land-based supply route from India to connect with the Burma Road-to be called the Ledo Road.²⁸ Finally, and in direct relation to the first two, Stilwell was many times only a commander in title. When giving orders to Chinese leaders, he never knew which ones they would accept. Many would wait until Stilwell’s orders came through Chiang-Kai-shek’s direct representative, General Lin Wei.²⁹ This made for an interesting command and control relationship.

On 13 March 1943, Slim met Alexander for the first time in Prome. Less than a week later, on 19 March, he took command of Burma Corps (BurCorps). In essence, he would command all ground forces (excluding the Chinese) in Burma. It was a tremendous challenge and one that would test all his abilities and incorporate all the lessons he had gleaned throughout his past. The best summary of the awesome challenge Slim faced was described by one of his former subordinates, Lieutenant General Sir Geoffrey Evans. Evans states,

Few commanders can have been faced with a more unfavourable situation than was Slim when he arrived on 19 March 1942 to assume command of what was termed BurCorps. In the place of desert and open country to which he had been accustomed until then, the terrain was jungle and rivers; the troops he was to command did not know him; their training, equipment and transport were unfitted for operations in this type of country and their morale had undergone a severe shaking as a result of continuous withdrawals. His “skeleton” headquarters had been hastily made up from officers drawn from Headquarters Burma Area Army, wireless communication was practically non-existent except through the cavalry regiment; there were no maps and transport was at a premium. Most disturbing was the fact that there was no reinforcements nor of replacing casualties to men and material, that both had to be carefully preserved. Of Japanese movements little was known, particularly since the small Royal Air Force contingent had been overwhelmed, and often the first intimation of the enemy’s presence was a hail of tracer bullets accompanied by the shrieks of their soldiers as they hurled themselves from a flank or from the rear. But above all was the uncertainty as to the future. Was it to be a complete withdrawal from Burma or was there to be an

opportunity for a counter-offensive? Somebody, at some time, had to make the decision so that plans could be realistic.³⁰

As soon as Slim assumed command, he conducted his own commander's estimate. He determined where he was and where he wanted to go, and how he was going to get there. In determining where he was, he immediately began visiting his Soldiers to make an assessment. While he was doing this, he moved his headquarters right behind his leading division. He wanted to assure his Soldiers that he was part of the team and the closeness of his headquarters facilitated more frequent visits with them.

After spending some time with his Soldiers and staff he made his assessments of BurCorps. He put together a list of factors that had contributed to the situation they currently found themselves. These factors included: 1) An intelligence system which contributed nothing of importance regarding the enemy; 2) A collection of Soldiers and units ill-trained and ill-equipped for jungle warfare; 3) His combat units were severely below strength in men and equipment; 4) The local populace was of little assistance to the Allied cause; 5) There was a huge gap of eighty miles between his two divisions, which the Japanese continually capitalized upon; 6) Most importantly, morale was drastically dropping amongst his Soldiers.³¹

Slim combined his assessment with his understanding of the mission (which was unclear at best), to decide his next step. He states,

Still, whatever our eventual purpose, delay, holding or advance, from all points of view it was necessary, somehow or other, to wrest the initiative from the Japanese. That meant we must hit him, and hit him hard enough to throw him off balance. Could we do it? I thought so.³²

Although Slim may have thought so, he would find out shortly that his optimism could not make up for the severe weaknesses in his unit.

On 29 March 1942, Slim received orders from Alexander to attack south from his current positions at Prome. This was in response to Stilwell's request to have BurCorps relieve Japanese pressure on Chinese units located near Toungoo. Although Slim desired contact with the Japanese, it appears this attack was ahead of his own timetable to conduct offensive operations.³³ His forces had just completed their brutal withdrawal from the Sittang River and had little time to reorganize and consolidate.

Slim obeyed his orders and executed the attack, which quickly failed. This was due to the poor condition of his Soldiers and because BurCorps had absolutely no air support for the mission. The reason for the lack of air support was due to the fact that by the end of March all Allied aircraft were either destroyed or driven out of Burma.³⁴ The end result of the attack was a large loss in men, equipment, and perhaps more importantly, a decline in what little confidence the men in BurCorps had built in the early days of Slim's command.

From then on, the proverbial snowball effect took place for Slim and the BurCorps, as well as the Chinese. At the beginning of April, both forces were now in full withdrawal and approaching retreat. With complete air superiority, the Japanese began bombing Mandalay on the 3 April. A few days later, on 7 April, an additional Japanese division arrived in Rangoon by sea from Singapore. The Japanese now had sufficient forces on the ground to complete the rout.

On 11 April 1942, the Japanese continued their offensive and two days later achieved a breakthrough in the British defense. This breakthrough was the trigger for the British to make a decision reminiscent of the blowing of the Sittang Bridge. As discussed earlier in the thesis, oil was one of the principal reasons why Japan invaded Burma. The

area the BurCorps currently occupied, in and around Yenangyuang, contained the vast preponderance of Burma's oil wells (see figure 5). With the Japanese close to seizing the oil wells, the British, who had already rigged them for demolition, blew up almost 5,000 oil derricks. With it, went the sole source of the Allies' gasoline and oil in Burma.³⁵

In all probability, the person most disturbed about the action was Stilwell. In an example of the lack of communication between the Chinese and England, Stilwell learned of these events after they occurred. In conjunction with this, the BurCorps withdrew from the area after demolition, which left an exposed flank for Stilwell's forces. This was something else Stilwell had not anticipated. Despite the secrecy of British intentions, Stilwell still attempted to assist the BurCorps in its plight. He ordered one of the Chinese divisions to attack the Japanese to facilitate the BurCorps withdrawal. In a prime example that Stilwell was their commander in name only, the Chinese disregarded the order and conducted their own withdrawal.

On 26 April 1942, General Alexander met with Slim and Stilwell for a conference in Mandalay. At that time, the Chinese were a non-factor and the Japanese were approaching Lashio. With the current situation, Alexander formally announced that Wavell believed a full withdrawal into India was necessary. With that said, the generals agreed on the withdrawal location to be to the north of Mandalay. Their remaining tasks were to ensure the Japanese did not cut their forces off prior to entering Burma, deciding the specific withdrawal route, and how to keep contact between BurCorps and the Chinese.³⁶

To accomplish the above tasks, the Allies came up with a withdrawal plan that faced two enemies in getting its forces safely into India. The first was the Japanese, who

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Figure 5. Yenangyuang April 1942

Source: Geoffrey Evans, *Slim as Military Commander* (London: D. Van Nostrand Inc., 1969), 72.

appeared to get stronger each day. The second was time, which in days would bring about the monsoon season. The monsoons with their ensuing rain would dramatically change the environment and make movement nearly impossible. The next two weeks would prove that each foe would do its utmost to desynchronize the Allied plan.

The first wrench in the plan came when the Japanese seized Lashio on 29 April 1942. With this territory now in Japanese hands, the Allies could no longer execute a synchronized withdrawal between the Chinese and BurCorps. The Chinese route would now take them north of Mandalay to Myitkyina, while Slim's BurCorps would move to Monywa, across the Chindwin River (a river which did not possess any operational bridges to get across it) and into India near the town of Imphal.

The first of May turned out to be one of more disastrous days of a humiliating period for the British (see figure 6). On that day, the Japanese captured Mandalay and additionally, got behind BurCorps in their movement to Monywa and seized this town as well. Monywa was critical to the British, since it offered the best terrain to cross the Chindwin by foot. After two days of fierce fighting, BurCorps took back the town and began the arduous task of crossing the Chindwin.

By 9 May, the majority of the BurCorps crossed the Chindwin. During the crossing, Slim's forces became a magnet for refugees wanting to leave Burma. This was another challenge thrown into the mix for Slim. After crossing the Chindwin, BurCorps faced one more significant obstacle in its movement into India--the Kabaw Valley.

The Kabaw valley was certainly not the ideal location for an already decimated unit to move through. There were three key reasons and each was accentuated by the monsoon. First, the valley itself was notorious for breeding the malarial mosquito.³⁷ This

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Figure 6. Retreat from Burma 1942

Source: Geoffrey Evans, *Slim as Military Commander* (London: D. Van Nostrand Inc., 1969), 81.

mosquito would thrive on humans whose immune systems were severely degraded. Second, the early monsoon conditions combined with the valley conditions to enhance the effects of dysentery and other tropical conditions. Finally, the terrain was in a word, brutal. As an example, the Soldiers of BurCorps would have to climb the 7,000- foot Shenam Pass, made treacherous by the rains, before finally entering India. The crossing in itself would be extremely difficult. Adding a savage enemy bearing down on BurCorps made the task even more daunting for Slim.

Slim describes the horrific condition of his Soldiers, yet with a touch of his keen sense of humor in the following comments:

Clothing was in rags, officers and men had only what they stood up in. Beards were common as shaving kits had grown scarcer and scarcer. I had tried growing a beard myself at one time in the retreat when it was becoming rather fashionable, but mine appeared completely white, and the probable effect on the troops of having a Corps Commander who looked like Father Christmas was such that I resumed shaving with the relic of a blade.³⁸

After six unimaginable days, the BurCorps broke through the Kabaw valley and on 15 May 1942, made it into India. Well to the north of BurCorps, it would take Stilwell and the Chinese ten more days before their forces made it into northern India. If either force possessed any intelligence at all, which it did not, it would have found that no Japanese forces were within dozens of miles from their locations.

Why did the Japanese not continue their pursuit of the Allies? It appears two factors stopped the Japanese pursuit at the Chindwin River. The first was the amount of booty BurCorps left at the crossings of the Chindwin. The best estimates say BurCorps left more than two thousand vehicles, one hundred and ten tanks, and forty artillery pieces at the near side for the Japanese.³⁹ This was a significant addition to the Japanese inventory. Second, just as the monsoon was a demoralizing factor to the Allies, it may

have had an adverse effect on the Japanese as well. Perhaps, it is easy to forget that the Japanese were tired as well and needed to conduct an operational pause. As an example, the Japanese 33rd Division had marched for 127 days, taken part in thirty-four battles and covered over 1500 miles, some of it--on foot--at the rate of thirty miles a day.⁴⁰ These are very impressive numbers, which had a significant impact on the physical, mental, and emotional state of the Japanese.

With the Japanese stopping their pursuit at the Chindwin and the Allies making it into India, the first phase of the battle for Burma ended. It was a tragic defeat for the British. They had retreated nearly 1,000 miles in some three and a half months--the longest retreat ever carried out by a British Army unit.⁴¹ Slim had commanded the Burcorps for two months of the retreat.

In looking at sheer numbers, the losses for the British were not that significant (although any loss has significance).⁴² Best estimates show 1,499 British Soldiers dead and nearly 12,000 Soldiers wounded.⁴³ However, the totals are somewhat skewed since they do not include the vast numbers of Soldiers who were incapacitated due to illness.

Perhaps, the best summary of the Allied effort during the fighting was made by General Stilwell himself. When asked by a group of reporters on his thoughts concerning the initial action, Stilwell commented,

No military commander in history ever made a voluntary retreat. All retreats are ignominious as hell. I claim we got a hell of a beating. We got run out of Burma--and it is humiliating as hell. I think we ought to find out what caused it, go back, and retake it.⁴⁴

As the Allied forces settled into India, there was one man who was to heed Stilwell's words--Slim. The next chapter focuses on Slim's analysis on what caused the

defeat and what his actions were to ensure it did not occur again. He began this analysis almost immediately as his Soldiers straggled into India. Slim states,

On the last day of that nine-hundred-mile retreat I stood on a bank beside the road and watched the rearguard march into India. All of them, British, Indian, and Gurkha, were gaunt and ragged as scarecrows. Yet, as they trudged behind their surviving officers in groups pitifully small, they still carried their arms and kept their ranks, they were still recognizable as fighting units. They might look like scarecrows, but they looked like soldiers, too.⁴⁵

Slim had much work to be done, but now he had a start point and a foundation that began with his Soldiers.

¹Michael Calvert, *Slim* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 25.

²Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000) 169.

³Woodburn S. Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, vol. 2 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1959), 71.

⁴Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War, 1941-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 6.

⁵Ian Lyall Grant, *Burma: The Turning Point: The Seven Battles of the Tiddim Road* (Chichester, England: Zampi, 1993), 21.

⁶Allen, xviii.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Michael Hickey, *The Unforgettable Army: Slim's XIVth Army in Burma* (Kent, England: Spellmount, Ltd., 1992), 26.

⁹Calvert, 25.

¹⁰Slim, 5.

¹¹Calvert, 25.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Slim, 10.

¹⁴James Lunt, *Hell of a Licking: The Retreat from Burma, 1941-1942* (London: Collins Press, 1986), 101.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 143.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 148.

²¹Allen, 36.

²²David Rooney, *Burma Victory: Imphal, Kohima, and the Chindit Issue, March 1944 to May 1945* (London: Arms, 1992), 13.

²³Raymond A. Callahan, *Burma, 1942-1945: The Politics and Strategy of the Second World War* (London: Davis Publishing, 1978), 36.

²⁴Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standardbearer* (Hertfordshire, England: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 82.

²⁵A reminder, Cowan and Scott were young captains when Slim served as the Battalion Adjutant for the Gurkhas in the early 1920s.

²⁶Slim, 18.

²⁷Donovan Webster, *The Burma Road: The Epic Story of the China-Burma-India Theater in World War II* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 31.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Slim, 17.

³⁰Geoffrey Evans, "Field-Marshal The Viscount Slim" in Michael Carver, *The War Lords: Military Commanders of the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 379-380.

³¹Slim, 28-30.

³²*Ibid.*, 28.

³³Geoffrey Evans, *Slim as Military Commander* (London: D. Van Nostrand, Inc., 1969), 69.

³⁴Lewin, 85.

³⁵Webster, 36.

³⁶Rooney, 15.

³⁷Ibid., 16.

³⁸Slim, 108.

³⁹Webster, 44.

⁴⁰Allen, 79.

⁴¹Evans, “Field-Marshal The Viscount Slim”, 380.

⁴²No reliable figures are available on Chinese and Japanese losses.

⁴³Allen, 638.

⁴⁴Webster, 45.

⁴⁵Slim, 109-110.

CHAPTER 3

THE BURMA CAMPAIGN: REBUILD

16 MAY 1942-15 OCTOBER 1943

On 20 May 1942, the BurCorps was dissolved and the British leadership began planning for a new command and control structure. This left Slim without a command, but left him with some valuable time to reflect on the past months. He particularly pondered his own performance. A performance, which he felt left much to be desired and was woefully inadequate compared to his Japanese counterparts.¹

Slim describes these feelings in his memoirs. American historian David W. Hogan Jr., who wrote the introduction to the 2000 edition of the memoirs, summarized Slim's words in the following passage.²

The only test of generalship is success, and I had succeeded in nothing I had attempted. . . . The soldier may comfort himself with the thought that, whatever the result, he has done his duty faithfully and steadfastly, but the commander has failed in his duty if he has not won victory--for that is his duty. He has no other comparable to it. He will go over in his mind the events of the campaign. "Here," he will think, "I went wrong; here I took counsel of my fears when I should have been bold; there I should have waited to gather strength, not struck piecemeal; at such a moment I failed to grasp opportunity when it was presented to me." He will remember the soldiers whom he sent into the attack that failed and who did not come back. He will recall the look in the eyes of men who trusted him. "I have failed them," he will say to himself, "and failed my country!" He will see himself for what he is--a defeated general. In a dark hour, he will turn in upon himself and question the very foundations of the leadership and his manhood. And then he must stop! For, if he is ever to command in battle again, he must shake off these regrets, and stamp on them, as they claw at his will and self-confidence. He must beat off these attacks he delivers against himself, and cast out the doubts born of failure. Forget them, and remember only the lessons to be learnt from defeat--they are more from victory.³

Slim would soon begin to apply these lessons. In early June 1942, he assumed command of the newly formed 15 Corps. The new corps would be part of a reorganized

Eastern Army, comprised of two corps, to defend India. Slim's corps consisted of two Indian divisions, the 14 and 26, neither of them battle tested or jungle trained.⁴ The corps had two main tasks. These were responsibility for the internal security for the Indian states of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa--some 185,000 square miles--and for defending the southern sector of the Indo-Burmese frontier and Bengal coast from seaborne attacks.⁵ The other corps in the Army, the 4 Corps was responsible for securing the eastern boundary of India from a potential Japanese attack.

During the first weeks of Slim's command, violence exploded throughout India. Within the country, riots, destruction of communications, murder of British Soldiers and arson of numerous supply facilities caused famine conditions in India, particularly in Bengal.⁶ The British used a majority of their units to stop the violence and restore services in India.⁷ It was not the preferred method to begin preparing the Allies to retake Burma.

As tensions lessened in the country, Slim could now focus on preparing his Soldiers for future operations. Since the conclusion of the retreat, Slim spent many hours not only analyzing his performance, but also looking at the performance of his Soldiers and units. After taking command, he composed a memorandum discussing the tactical lessons learned during the retreat. These lessons were the building blocks Slim would use to formulate his training plan to prepare his Soldiers tactically for war. The lessons were:

1. The individual soldier must learn, by living, moving, and exercising in it, that the jungle is neither impenetrable nor unfriendly. When he has once learned to move and live in it, he can use it for concealment, covered movement, and surprise.

2. Patrolling is the master key to jungle fighting. All units, not only infantry battalions, must learn to patrol in the jungle, boldly, widely, cunningly, and offensively.

3. All units must get used to having Japanese parties in their rear, and when this happens regard not themselves, but the Japanese, as “surrounded.”

4. In defense, no attempt should be made to hold long continuous lines. Avenues of approach must be covered and enemy penetration between our posts dealt with at once by mobile local reserves who have completely reconnoitered the country.

5. There should rarely be frontal attacks and never frontal attacks on narrow fronts. Attacks should follow hooks and come in from flank or rear, while pressure holds the enemy in front.

6. Tanks can be used in almost any country except swamp. In close country they must always have infantry with them to defend and reconnoiter for them. They should always be used in the maximum numbers available and capable of being deployed. Whenever possible penny packets must be avoided.⁸ “The more you use, the fewer you lose.”

7. There are no noncombatants in jungle warfare. Every unit and subunit, including medical ones is responsible for its own all-around protection, including patrolling, at all times.

8. If the Japanese are allowed to hold the initiative they are formidable. When **we** have it, they are confused and easy to kill. By mobility away from roads, surprise, and offensive action we must regain and keep the initiative.⁹

After determining his training focus, Slim began the planning and preparation for training. In terms of organization, he formed a few critical units to assist in training his

Soldiers. The first was the formation of a training division within the corps to assist other units in training. This division, the 70, became available to Slim once tensions had died down in India. The second unit was a special training brigade to test new organizations and tactics. Among the problems this brigade worked on was improving jungle mobility by using jeeps or ponies as transport.¹⁰

In the planning of all training, Slim wanted the emphasis on fitness. He believed fighting in the jungle required physically fit Soldiers. Within all battalions, companies would be pulled from security duties to conduct training. This training would focus heavily on patrolling, swimming, water crossing, and digging fighting positions.¹¹ Slim wanted to ensure his individual Soldiers and smaller units were trained before executing higher-level training. He believed this training would do much to raise the soldiers' morale.¹² Additionally, Slim had strong convictions about keeping Soldiers engaged. He stated, "It is a simple rule that the worse the situation the more the troops should be kept fully and actively employed."¹³

Besides the training of his units, Slim knew his own headquarters must be proficient in all areas to aid him in command and control functions. His analysis was that when he took command, the headquarters was neither mobile nor efficient.¹⁴ To remedy this situation, he mandated that everyone in the headquarters, including himself, would qualify with a rifle, pistol, Bren gun, bayonet, mortar, and grenade.¹⁵ In the area of physical training, each day began with route marches, which got more difficult in terms of length and toughness as the days went on.

In the area of mobility, Slim had his staff work on developing a headquarters that could quickly be set-up and moved when the tactical situation dictated. Because there

was no way of knowing when and where the Corps headquarters would move, each office¹⁶ was based on the yakdan--a box fitted with rings and chains--so that the equipment and supplies of each office could be loaded into lorries, trains, boats, aircraft or even slung on mules or carried by porters.¹⁷ Once each office received the required number of yakdans, the headquarters continually drilled on tearing down and setting up the headquarters. After much training, the headquarters was able to complete the entire preparation within twenty minutes.¹⁸

Slim was most impressed with the new capabilities of the headquarters. He stated,

We tested our system pretty thoroughly in exercises and manoeuvres and assured ourselves it worked. I doubt if any headquarters ever had harder or more intensive training, and I am sure no body of men could have responded to it more wholeheartedly and effectively. Within three months we were a mobile and efficient fighting headquarters, very different from the static and rather stodgy crowd who had left Calcutta.¹⁹

As Slim continued to train his corps in preparation for future operations (which included interdivisional exercises over wide ranges of country),²⁰ a new operation was in the final planning stages. It was to be a new British offensive to begin in the fall of 1942. As it unfolded, this offensive, called the Arakan Offensive, would have great significance for the Allies and for Slim himself. The remainder of this chapter discusses this operation and how it affected the tactical and operational environment Slim would enter when he assumed command of the 14 Army in October 1943.

The planning for the Arakan Offensive began just a few days after the BurCorps made it into India in mid-May 1942. At that time, Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff discussed the possibility of launching a huge offensive in the next months with an end state of recapturing Rangoon by the end of September 1942. In perhaps a rare moment of realism, Wavell replied back to his superiors that this was unfeasible and a

more realistic goal would be to clear parts of northern Burma during the dry season (October-May).²¹ After some months of going back in forth, it was decided during the end of July that the offensive would be much more limited in scope than Churchill's original desires. Its objective would be to clear enemy forces out of the Mayu Peninsula and seize the Akyab Island on the Arakan coast. This offensive would serve three purposes. First, it would reduce the threat of a Japanese attack along the Burma coast into India. Second, Akyab Island would provide the British an excellent airfield to use during continued operations into Burma. Finally, a victory would be huge for morale for the Soldiers and bring some prestige for the units back home.²²

Confidence was high for success among British leadership. The intelligence report believed there were no more than four Japanese battalions and some divisional troops defending the Arakan coast.²³ The Akyab Island itself was manned by a small garrison and maintained limited communications with higher Japanese headquarters located in Burma. The British leadership believed success in the operation was achievable.²⁴

Wavell's original plan was named code-named Anakin. The plan called for a combination of a land attack moving north to south to seize the peninsula and an amphibious assault to seize the Akyab Island. Although there were many unanswered resource questions, the plan was set for execution. The execution date was set for 17 October when the 14 Indian Division (commanded by Major-General W.L. Lloyd) would begin advancing south into the Arakan Peninsula.

The 14 Indian Division along with portions of the 26 Indian Division were detached from Slim's command to take part in the offensive. This left Slim with his

headquarters and some smaller troop formations under his control. What was critical about this situation was that the Commander of the Eastern Army, Lieutenant-General N.M.S. Irwin decided that a corps headquarters was not needed to control the offensive.²⁵ Irwin would command the entire operation, which at this time included four brigades, with his army staff and not an intermediate corps headquarters in between.²⁶ The decision to not assign a corps headquarters would later prove disastrous for both the British and for Irwin's career.²⁷

As October rolled into November, the British continued the slow march down the Arakan Peninsula (see figure 7). It became obvious from the start that success in the operation may not be as easy as anticipated. On 17 November, Wavell canceled the amphibious portion of the operation due to lack of boats and air cover.²⁸ The plan would now be for all land forces to move south down the Peninsula and then take the Akyab Islands.

By the end of 1942, the main effort of the attack, the 14 Indian Division, had succeeded in moving down the Arakan Peninsula and within striking distance of the Akyab. Unfortunately for the British, three things occurred at this time. First, the British had over-extended their supply lines and were running short in many classes of supply. Second, Lloyd and the 14 Indian Division were mentally and physically exhausted after weeks of tough fighting. Third, the Japanese began reinforcing the approach into Akyab with a significant number of Soldiers. They were able to shift forces from other areas in Burma since this was the only area where the Allies were attacking. The combination of these caused the 14 Indian Division attack to culminate before reaching the Akyab Island.²⁹

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Figure 7. First Arakan Offensive, 1943

Source: Robert Lyman, *Slim: Master of War, 1942-1945* (London: Constable and Robinson Ltd., 2004), 296.

With the 14 Indian Division unable to continue the attack, Wavell decided to send more units to force the issue. Five more brigades were sent to take Akyab and placed under control of Lloyd. Again, Irwin decided a corps headquarters was not needed and Lloyd (the 14 Indian Division Commander) now had responsibility for the nine brigades.³⁰

The first two months of 1943 saw things go worse for the British, with the additional brigades simply reinforcing failure. British Historian Ray Callahan put the situation in perspective when he stated, “The British collapse in the Arakan over the next month was as bad as anything that had happened in Malaya or Burma.”³¹ With events spiraling downhill, Slim was called to Calcutta to talk with General Irwin.

At the meeting, Irwin told Slim he wanted him to go to Arakan and observe the operations. Slim states, “All I was to do now was to look around, get into the picture, and report to him.”³² Slim would be an observer and would not have authority to make any decisions on the ground. During the meeting, Slim inquired again if a corps headquarters would soon go to Arakan, but Irwin reiterated that another headquarters was not needed at this time.³³

It was a difficult situation for Slim. He felt embarrassed since he possessed no authority and felt he could be seen as a spy for Irwin.³⁴ However, Slim obeyed orders and reported three key problems back to Irwin. The first was that Lloyd’s divisional headquarters was not resourced to command and control nine brigades. The area of operations was too big and there were too many units for a division headquarters to administer. The second was morale was plummeting among the Soldiers. In an attack

which was conducted to raise morale; just the opposite was now happening. Finally, the tactics currently being used were entirely wrong and would never succeed.³⁵

Soon after Slim gave this report to Irwin, the Japanese began a counteroffensive to push the British back into India. At the beginning of April, Irwin replaced Lloyd with Major-General C. E. Lomax, who was the commander of the 26 Indian Division (Slim's other former division). During the same period, Slim was told to move part of his headquarters to Arakan. Irwin told Slim he would only control administrative matters in the area of operations and the inexperienced Lomax would control ground operations, reporting directly to Irwin.³⁶

Once again, Irwin had put Slim in a precarious situation. However, after nine days of this arrangement, Slim was finally given complete control in all areas. By that time, the only thing left for Slim to plan and execute was another withdrawal back into India (a task he was becoming all too familiar with). On 11 May 1943, he again succeeded in bringing his unit back into India, defeated, with a cost of over 5,000 Soldiers killed or wounded.³⁷

Slim put the repercussions of the Arakan in perspective when he stated, "It was no use crying over spilt milk. In war you have to pay for your mistakes, and in Arakan the same mistakes had been made again and again until the troops lost heart."³⁸ After almost a year of determination and hard work in attempting to transform a unit, it appeared that Slim and the British forces were back to square one. However, once again, the winds of change would soon blow favorably for Slim.

On 15 May, Slim was sitting down with some of his senior staff officers for dinner. It was a somber mood around the table and it would soon get worse. While Slim

was eating, he received a note from his signal officer from General Irwin. Slim read the note to himself; it read, “You have been relieved of your command. You will . . . return to Calcutta where you will await further posting.”³⁹ After reading the note, he put it into his pocket and continued eating.

Moments later, the signal officer again came to Slim with a note. Again, Slim read the note, relaxed and threw both notes to his Chief of Staff, saying, “I think this calls for the opening of a bottle of port or something if we have one.”⁴⁰ The second message read, “Cancel my first message. I have been relieved of my command and you are taking my place. Congratulations,” signed Irwin, Lieutenant General.⁴¹

In a matter of minutes, Slim went from corps commander to being relieved to being the Eastern Army Commander. His role as Eastern Army Commander did not last long as on 21 May; General George Giffard was officially named commander and Slim again assumed command of the 15 Corps. The Giffard-Slim duo would soon prove to be a valuable combination in changing the Allies fortunes in Burma.

¹Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 118.

²Hogan believes this passage reaches a level of honesty and self-revelation that few notable leaders ever reached in their own words.

³Slim, ix.

⁴Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standardbearer* (Hertfordshire, England: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 111.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Michael Calvert, *Slim* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 48.

⁷ *Ibid*

- ⁸Penny packets is slang for not massing tanks, but using them singularly.
- ⁹Slim, 142-143.
- ¹⁰Ibid., 142.
- ¹¹Calvert, 48.
- ¹²Slim, 131.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴Ibid., 138.
- ¹⁵Ibid., 139.
- ¹⁶An office would translate to a staff section today.
- ¹⁷Geoffrey Evans, *Slim as Military Commander* (London: D. Van Nostrand, Inc., 1969), 93.
- ¹⁸Ibid.
- ¹⁹Slim, 141.
- ²⁰Ibid., 146.
- ²¹Raymond A. Callahan, *Burma, 1942-1945: The Politics and Strategy of the Second World War* (London: Davis Publishing, 1978), 44.
- ²²Calvert, 48.
- ²³Slim, 149.
- ²⁴Calvert, 48.
- ²⁵Ibid., 50.
- ²⁶Ibid.
- ²⁷Callahan, 62.
- ²⁸Michael Hickey, *The Unforgettable Army: Slim's XIVth Army in Burma* (Kent, England: Spellmount, Ltd., 1992), 77.
- ²⁹Callahan, 62.
- ³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²Slim, 153.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Hickey, 77.

³⁵Evans, 94.

³⁶Calvert, 52.

³⁷Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War, 1941-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 638.

³⁸Slim, 160.

³⁹Calvert, 53.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

THE BURMA CAMPAIGN: REDEMPTION

16 OCTOBER 1943 to 14 AUGUST 1945

From the beginning, there was an instant bond between Giffard and Slim.

Geoffrey Evans gave his analysis on why this took place. He states,

From their first meeting, Generals Giffard and Slim had a respect and liking for one another, largely because they shared many of the same characteristics. Both had complete integrity; unassuming, but firm in their opinions, neither enjoyed publicity of a flamboyant nature; they had the same ideas on the exercise of command and the handling of their subordinates; they understood the soldier, his needs and his training; both were readily prepared to give the credit to others that was their due.¹

It would appear from Evans' glowing words that Slim had a senior leader who shared the values and love of Soldiers that he possessed.

Giffard initially instructed Slim to prepare his corps for offensive operations by the end of the monsoon season in October 1943. His new corps composition included two new full strength divisions (the 5 and 7 Indian Divisions) and part of the 81 West African Division (the other units remained under Eastern Army control). In preparing them, he first began by improving their living conditions to improve their morale while in garrison. He next concentrated on building up the units' depleted supply stocks.²

With morale and his units' horrible supply situation beginning to improve, Slim next focused on training. Although the monsoon drastically hindered the availability of training areas, Slim continued to train the corps for offensive operations. In early October, Slim moved his divisions and his headquarters near the Arakan Peninsula for pre combat checks in anticipation of an offensive. This would be one of his last actions as a corps commander, as days later he relinquished command to Lieutenant General Philip

Christison. He was told to be in Calcutta on 15 October 1943 by General Giffard to represent him at a high level meeting. Slim was once again without a command, but that would soon change.

When Slim arrived in Calcutta, he was met by Admiral Louis Mountbatten the newly appointed (as of 25 August) Supreme Commander of the South-East Asia Command (SEAC).³ Although SEAC was not formally established until 16 November 1943, Mountbatten was in the process of filling the key billets for command. The command itself would be a joint and combined organization with members from Britain and the United States in its ranks. Its purpose was to command and control all operations in the South-East Asia theatre, which included the CBI area of operations.⁴

As part of this massive reorganization effort, Mountbatten had recently named General Giffard as Commander of the 11 Army Group. Giffard was responsible for all British Commonwealth land forces within South-East Asia. However, he currently had no influence on the Chinese or American forces in the region.⁵ The solution to this difficult situation would come shortly.

Mountbatten was now in need of an Eastern Army Commander to control forces in any future Burma offensive. Obviously, he had heard from others about Slim's performance and potential, but 15 October 1943 was the first time they had met each other in person. Mountbatten immediately took a liking to Slim and offered him the position. Slim was excited about being offered the position, but there appeared to be some trepidation inside Slim. He asked Mountbatten, "Won't you have to ask General Giffard first?" Since Giffard was his subordinate, Mountbatten simply replied, "No!"⁶

With that one word, Slim became an army commander. Before departing the conference, Slim had one request for Mountbatten. He asked him if they could change the name of Eastern Army command. Slim felt the name was now synonymous with defeat and that a new name would be of assistance in improving morale.⁷ Mountbatten agreed and the Eastern Army became the 14 Army, with responsibility for conducting land operations in Burma.

In terms of task organization decisions within SEAC, there still remained one question. How did the Chinese and Stilwell fit into the organization? Mountbatten did not want to be directly responsible for Stilwell and the Chinese.⁸ Perhaps the best relationship would have the Chinese would fall under Giffard and the 11 Army.⁹ Thus, Giffard would then have responsibility for the two principal forces, which would conduct operations to retake Burma. As was the case with most things so far in the campaign, it would not be that easy.

When approached by Mountbatten on the subject, Stilwell came up with numerous excuses explaining why the Chinese could not be part of the 11 Army structure. The root of the problem was that Stilwell despised Giffard and in fact, the feeling was mutual.¹⁰ Stilwell's stubbornness was legendary and it appeared a solution would not come anytime soon. Just when it seemed this problem would remain unsolved, Stilwell suddenly exclaimed, "I am prepared to come under General Slim's operational control until I get to Kamaing."¹¹ For Stilwell, the importance of Kamaing, which was in northern Burma, was that at Kamaing the terrain transitioned from very restrictive too much more open. With more open terrain, Stilwell would have more maneuver options available to him and consequently, did not want anyone dictating his operations.

With this proposal, Slim reported to the Commander of the 11 Army (Giffard) for operations in middle and southern Burma with his 14 Army forces. He would report to the Commander of the SEAC (Mountbatten) for operations in northern Burma and portions of China with Stilwell's forces. Mountbatten and Slim quickly agreed to the command structure and thereby, probably avoided hours of frustrating negotiations. In summarizing the arrangement and dealing with Stilwell, Ronald Lewin states, "Since only an extraordinary command structure, it seemed, could accommodate an extraordinary man."¹²

In retrospect, Slim discusses the arrangement and how he dealt with Stilwell in the following passage:

In practice, this illogical command set-up worked surprisingly well. My method with Stilwell was based on what I'd learnt of him in the Retreat--to send him the minimum of written directions, but, whenever I wanted anything, to fly over and discuss it with him, alone. Stilwell, talking things over quietly with no one else present, was a much easier and more likeable person than the Vinegar Joe, with an audience. Alone I never found him unreasonable or obstructive. I think I told him to do something he did not approve of on only two or three occasions, and on each he confirmed, I will not say willingly, but with good grace."¹³

When Slim took command of the 14 Army, he knew he only had a matter of a few months, if not weeks, to prepare his unit to go back on the offensive. He arrived at the headquarters and the first thing he did was keep the current staff that was in place at this time. This first decision immediately raised the morale of the staff officers, who anticipated being replaced with Slim's old staff once he took command. Slim describes his rationale,

I do not believe in the system, so popular in the war, of commanders when promoted taking with them from the formations they leave, the cream of their staffs. These traveling circuses, grouped round particular generals, cause a great deal of heartburning and confusion. Not only is the subordinate headquarters skimmed of its best officers, but in the higher, a number of efficient and worthy

officers are abruptly thrown out to make room for newcomers. I am not at all sure either that the practice is good for the generals concerned themselves.¹⁴

As was the case when he took command of the 14 Corps, Slim determined what were the key problems within the Army. More importantly, he determined what problems, he as the Army Commander, should seek to fix. Again, he knew he had precious little time to develop solutions and then implement them. Slim found himself in a familiar situation in trying to pick up the pieces of a decimated unit.

In his analysis, Slim believed the 14 Army had three problems it had to fix, or as Slim said, “I found myself confronted by three major anxieties--supply, health, and morale.”¹⁵ Each of these was instrumental in the past in causing defeat for the British in Burma. Slim knew without addressing each problem, his unit would almost assuredly not break the chain of humiliating defeats.

Slim believed the area of supply would influence the remainder of the Burma Campaign the most. He states, “I knew the campaign in Burma would above all be a supply and transport problem, and I was determined to get the best possible man to take charge of that side for me.”¹⁶ That man turned out to be Major General “Alf” Snelling, who was one of few officers brought to the headquarters from the outside. Slim had worked with Snelling in the past and was impressed with his prior performance.

Slim gave his intent and Snelling immediately began tackling the problem. Snelling had three tasks he would have to accomplish to solve the overall problem. First, he had to determine what shortages existed within the 14 Army in all classes of supply. Second, once he identified these shortages, he had to procure the items. Finally, and the most difficult task, was transporting them to the right unit. This had been a critical

problem for the British since the loss of the Rangoon port, which forced them to transport supplies entirely by the poor land transportation networks in the region.

There were many shortages of supplies and equipment within the 14 Army. As Slim put it, “We were below our needs in most forms of equipment, notably vehicles, wireless sets, ambulances, and medical stores. In fact, we were short of everything.”¹⁷ The two most critical areas were in ammunition and food.

In the area of ammunition, the British found that the jungle environment required more amounts of ammunition than in other types of terrain. Further accentuating the problem was that the British placed operations in the CBI Theater as their lowest priority. The combination of needing more and receiving less made for the following shortages: rifle ammunition short 26 percent, sten and tommy-gun ammunition short 75 percent, two- and three-inch mortar ammunition short 25 percent, twenty-five-pounder high explosive rounds short 42 percent, and 5.5 inch high explosive rounds short 86 percent.¹⁸

Two distant factors caused the problems in the food arena. The first was the overall complexity in feeding the numerous divergent groups, which comprised the 14 Army. Snelling found there were some thirty different ration scales in the 14 Army. Among the Indians, which comprised a large majority of the Army, these scales differed by religion and district of origin.¹⁹ British Soldiers would eat anything (although preferring fresh meat), while members of the Hindu religion would not eat tinned meat. This was just one of the many quirks of menu planning logisticians dealt with.

The second factor was that shipping fresh food across any significant distance in the heat and humidity caused most items to spoil before reaching the front lines. After earlier attempts to ship food ended in failure, most logisticians did not try to ship food

anymore. Consequently, Soldiers in the rear areas were eating very well compared to their fellow Soldiers in the front lines. Slim found this out early in his command. He states, “The question was, ‘Were the men, especially in the forward areas, getting them?’ The answer was, as I had suspected, ‘No.’”²⁰

After determining specific shortages, Snelling had to procure the quantities he needed. It became clear after some investigative work that most of the shortage items were in India. The problem was getting them out of the supply depots, which were controlled by the Indian government. The reason why they did not leave the depots was because of the purchasing procedures between the Indian and British governments.²¹ India still used a peacetime procurement system, which was heavily laden in paperwork, causing delays. Upon taking command, Slim and Snelling presented this problem with a viable solution to British leadership. The new system was adopted and the result was a more efficient and timely procurement system. With supplies now more readily available, Snelling needed to complete the last task to solve the overall problem--transport.

The transport problem is best summarized by Slim’s following comment, “Inadequate railways, shortage of motor transport, few roads and those at the mercy of climate, to say nothing of enemy actions, made the movement of men and supplies a constant anxiety.”²² Slim wanted this anxiety relieved as much as possible and gave the mission to Snelling and his engineers.

The 14 Army did not inherit an entirely new problem. After the Japanese attacked into Burma in 1942, steps were taken to improve the transportation network inside India, thus allowing it to act as a base for future operations into Burma.²³ The 14 Army focus would be improving the transportation network from inner India to the front lines. It was

a momentous task, but one that had to be accomplished to give the Allies any chance of retaking Burma.

To accomplish the task, the 14 Army began by building three all-weather roads from the supply areas to the frontlines. This was done primarily by huge amounts of Indian labor and a good dose of ingenuity. In terms of the laborers, Slim paid them the following tribute,

These three roads were pick, shovel, and basket roads, made by human labour, with an almost laughable lack of machinery. The men who built them worked under the most arduous conditions of climate and with the most elementary scale of accommodation. Without this contribution we should never have built either the roads or the airfields that were vital for the Burma campaign and for the supply of China.²⁴

When Slim mentions the building of airfields, he touches on the other means of supplying forward units. In the early days of Slim's command, there were minimal sorties for use in transporting supplies. However, as the offensive campaign began in earnest, more aircraft became available for supply missions. The combination of air transport and the developing road network would later prove sufficient in getting the necessary classes of supply to the front line Soldiers.

Slim's second anxiety when taking command was the health issues within the 14 Army. The health of Soldiers was a critical determinant to placing combat power on the ground. Slim describes the seriousness of the problem in the following passage,

In 1943, for every man evacuated with wounds we had one hundred and twenty evacuated sick. The annual malaria rate alone was eighty-four per cent per annum of the total strength of the army and still higher among the forward troops. Next to malaria came a high incidence of dysentery, followed in this gruesome order of precedence by skin diseases and a mounting tale of mite or jungle typhus, a particularly fatal disease. At this time, the sick rate of men evacuated from their units rose to over twelve per thousand per day. A simple calculation showed me that in a matter of months at this rate my army would have melted away. Indeed, it was doing so under my eyes.²⁵

In solving this problem, which threatened to slowly destroy his army, Slim again looked to Snelling and his senior medical staff. The first thing they discovered was that, as was the case in most all others areas, the Burma theater was last in the priority for medical units, doctors, nurses and equipment.²⁶ Slim knew this was not going to change, so he focused his staff on potential solutions, which included obtainable resources.

Snelling and the staff came up with a group of four actions, which slowly, but steadily showed positive results in reducing the effects of health on Soldier combat readiness. This is shown by the drop in the ratio of cases of sickness to battle casualty from 120:1 when they first started the program to a ratio of 20:1 within a year and finally to 6:1 when the campaign ended.²⁷ The first of these actions was utilizing the latest medical research and drugs in fighting disease. Although the supply system was slow in getting these “remedies” into theater, they were critical in saving innumerable lives.²⁸ The second action was the establishment of Malaria Forward Treatment units (small field hospitals) located behind the front lines to treat malaria victims. In the past, Soldiers were evacuated hundreds of miles away into the rear area. This evacuation process resulted in the soldier’s condition becoming worse, added more congestion to the already crowded road network, and on the average resulted in the Soldier not returning to his old unit for at least five months.²⁹ Once this new system was emplaced, Soldiers were evacuated to the treatment unit within twenty-four hours and would normally return to his unit in three weeks.³⁰ With the availability of combat Soldiers at a premium for both forces, the drastic reduction in the time it took a Soldier to return to his unit was invaluable. The third factor was the growing capability of air evacuation to transport not only health casualties, but battle casualties as well. As the British became more experienced with

using air evacuation, their system looked very similar to the procedures currently used by the U.S. Army in evacuating casualties on the ground. Once a Soldier was diagnosed with a serious ailment, he would board a small Moth, Auster, or L5 airplane located near the treatment unit and arrive at a transfer point some ten to forty miles to the rear of the front line. From there, the Soldier would board a Dakota airplane and fly to a general hospital for care.³¹ Slim, emphasizing the importance of air evacuation states, “Air evacuation did more in the Fourteenth Army to save lives than any other agency.”³²

The final factor in reducing the effects of health problems within the 14 Army was leader involvement. Slim insisted his leaders ensured that their Soldiers dressed properly, took the proper medicines, and practiced good hygiene habits. He then backed up his words by visiting units to check their compliance with his orders. If he did not find compliance, Slim immediately fired the commander of the unit. As he states, “I only had to sack three, by then the rest had got my meaning.”³³ With the final piece of the solution in place, the impact of health dramatically dropped, although it remained a concern throughout the campaign.

Slim’s final anxiety was the state of morale within the 14 Army. Slim states, “There was no doubt that the disasters in Arakan, following an unbroken record of defeat, had brought morale in large sections of the army to a dangerously low ebb.”³⁴ Slim knew that if his forces had any chance at all to defeat the Japanese and retake Burma, morale must improve quickly throughout the ranks. In determining where to start in this most difficult task, he began with himself.

Slim discusses how he began the process of improving morale with the following comments, “So when I took command, I sat quietly down to work out this business of

morale. I came to certain conclusions, based not on any theory that I had studied, but on some experience and a good deal of hard thinking. It was on these conclusions that I set out consciously to raise the fighting spirit of my army.”³⁵

Throughout history, there have been many leaders who have addressed the issue of morale within an individual Soldier and within a unit. They have specifically given their definitions of morale and how to improve morale in an organization. Of these leaders, few have truly delved intellectually into the subject as much as Slim. An example of this is portrayed in his explanation of morale and his belief on the foundations of morale. He explains,

Morale is a state of mind. It is that intangible force which will move a whole group of men to give their last ounce to achieve something, without counting the cost to themselves; that makes them feel they are part of something greater than themselves. If they are to feel that, their morale must, if it is to endure--and the essence of morale is that it should endure--have certain foundations. These foundations are spiritual, intellectual, and material, and that is the order of their importance. Spiritual first, because only spiritual foundations can stand real strain. Next intellectual, because men are swayed by reason as well as feeling. Material last--important, but last--because the very highest kinds of morale are often met when material conditions are lowest.³⁶

In discussing these foundations, Slim further dissected each to address their critical components. In terms of a spiritual foundation, Slim used the word not in its religious meaning, but as a belief in a cause. However, he did believe religion had always been a strong foundation in military morale and would continue to be so. Slim felt there were four components within the spiritual foundation. First, there must be a great and noble object or cause that is morally understood within the Soldier and unit. Second, its achievement must be vital or necessary. Third, the method chosen to achieve the object must be active and aggressive. Finally, the Soldier must feel his actions contribute

directly to the attainment of the object.³⁷ In other words, he must have a sense of purpose inside himself.

In the area of intellectual foundation, Slim believed there were three components. First, the Soldier must believe in his mind that the object is attainable. Second, the Soldier must see that his unit is an efficient one, which is focused on an attainable object. Finally, the Soldier must have confidence in his leaders and believe his leaders have his best interests at heart.³⁸

In the last foundation, material, Slim listed three components. First, the Soldier must feel he will get fair treatment from his commanders and the army as a whole. Second, the Soldier must be provided the best weapons and equipment available for the task. Finally, every soldier's living and working conditions must be made as comfortable as possible.³⁹

Slim knew the above were only words and now sought to put these words into actions. These actions, if successfully combined would create the environment that raised morale within the individual Soldier. As an individual soldier's morale improved, there would be a direct correlation to the increase in morale in the soldier's unit. Slim knew this could not be accomplished overnight.

In his quest to raise morale within the army, Slim began with the action he had done throughout his military career--he talked to Soldiers. Slim would talk to complete units, collections of officers, staff sections, and individual Soldiers. Slim summed up his initial period of command in the following statement, "Whenever I could get away from my headquarters, and that throughout the campaign was about a third of the time, I was in

these first few months more like a parliamentary candidate than a general--except that I never made a promise.”⁴⁰

Slim did not made promises in his talks, but he did focus on the spiritual, intellectual, and material foundations of morale. Slim would begin his discussions by addressing the material foundations of war. These included the obvious areas, such as food, mail, pay, beer, leave, and discussing when they would be going home. Once he had their attention, he would shift his talk into the spiritual and intellectual foundations.⁴¹

In particular, he focused on ensuring his Soldiers understood what the object of their fighting was, that the objective was attainable, and how they would obtain it. In no uncertain terms, Slim told his Soldiers that the object was not to defend India from Japanese attack or even reoccupy Burma. The object was the complete destruction of the Japanese Army through violent offensive action and was truly obtainable.⁴²

Again, Slim knew that these words to his Soldiers were not enough. These words must be followed with quick positive deeds. In the upcoming months, these deeds included: (1) increased Soldier patrolling to build individual confidence and squash the myth that the Japanese owned the jungles, (2) conducting unit offensive operations against out-manned enemy positions to build unit confidence and squash the myth of Japanese superiority (Slim was careful to ensure the force ratios were always significantly in his favor before conducting these early attacks.), (3) publishing a theater newspaper to increase pride amongst units, (4) building new rest and reinforcement (training) camps to re-energize tired Soldiers and improve the fighting skills of others, (5) raising the standard of discipline throughout the 14 Army--Slim tasked his commanders to focus on saluting, appearance, and bearing within their units, and (6) procuring as

much new equipment as possible for his Soldiers, despite the fact that the theater was certainly low in priority.⁴³

The above actions combined with Slim's words began to raise the morale throughout the Army. Slim states, "We translated my rough notes on the foundations of morale, spiritual, intellectual, and material into a fighting spirit for our men and a confidence in themselves and their leaders that was to impress our friends and surprise our enemies."⁴⁴

As Slim was in the midst of preparing his army for future operations, Mountbatten was determining what those exact operations would be. In November 1943, Mountbatten decided on a combination of seven operations for execution in the upcoming months. These operations were: (1) conduct an amphibious assault with the 33 Corps to seize the Andaman Islands, (2) conduct an attack with the 15 Corps to secure key terrain on the Arakan Peninsula to facilitate seizing Akyab Island, (3) conduct an attack with 4 Corps to seize key terrain across the Chindwin River, (4) conduct an attack with Chinese forces under the command of Stilwell on the northern front to secure the Moguang-Myikyina area, (5) conduct an attack with Chinese forces from Yunnan on the northern front towards the towns of Bhamo and Lashio, (6) conduct an airborne assault with the 50 Parachute Brigade to seize Indaw with a subsequent link-up operation with the 26 Indian Division that would be flown to Indaw with air assets, (7) utilize long-range penetration groups (commanded by General Orde Wingate) to cut communication lines in Indaw to support the airborne assault and support the British and Chinese attacks on the northern front.⁴⁵

Mountbatten's proposed operations were accepted by the Combined Chiefs of Staff in late November, but still needed the approval of Chiang-Kai-Shek and required shipping and landing craft from Europe before they could begin execution. In days, Mountbatten found he was not successful in either count. First, Mountbatten lost his shipping and landing craft when the Normandy Invasion went into more serious planning and preparation stages. Second, Chiang-Kai-Shek decided he would not approve the use of Chinese forces from Yunnan as Mountbatten planned. The SEAC would go back to reassess their options. Additionally, Mountbatten found the American leadership was putting increasing pressure to avoid any operations designed to retake Burma and instead focus all assets to assist the Chinese in the north. It felt the quickest way to defeat the Japanese was through China and not Burma.⁴⁶

Mountbatten and his planners decided that they would trim the operations from the original seven to four. The four, which subsequently won formal approval on 14 January 1944 were the 15 Corps attack on the Arakan, the attack by the 4 Corps to the Chindwin River, the attack of Stilwell's forces to seize the Myitkyina-Mogaung area, and the use Wingate's forces to support the Stilwell operation. In analyzing the potential impact of these operations, Mountbatten stated, "None of these could result in a big strategic victory; nor could they achieve any of the major objectives laid down in my original directive from the Prime Minister."⁴⁷

Despite Mountbatten's discontent, the orders came quickly to Slim for immediate execution. The first operation affecting Slim's scope was the attack of 15 Corps down the Arakan Peninsula. In actuality, this attack had its origins soon after Slim took command in October 1943.⁴⁸ At this time, the 15 Corps began creeping down the peninsula, with

the goal of building confidence as well as seizing ground to facilitate future operations. By the time the group of four operations was approved, the 15 Corps was in position to seize the key Maungdaw-Buthidaung Road (see figure 8). As Slim executed his plan, his opponents would soon execute their plans.

In the summer of 1943, the Japanese began planning their strategy for the near and far term. A number of factors influenced a decision to begin offensive operations at the beginning of the year to seize key parts of India. First, in the early months of 1943, the Allies used the long-range penetration groups (led by Wingate) to infiltrate behind Japanese lines in northern Burma and harass their supply lines. It is debatable how successful these attacks truly were, but they did plant some seeds of vulnerability in the minds of the Japanese leadership. These seeds grew into thoughts that perhaps, their defense may not be strong enough to achieve their goals in the theater. Consequently, a new offensive was needed to achieve their final objectives. Second, the Japanese anticipated an Allied offensive was imminent.⁴⁹ They believed the area around Imphal would be the start point for this offensive. If the Japanese could grab the initiative and take Imphal, the Allied window of opportunity for an offensive would close.

The Japanese, much like the Allies, debated long and hard on what shape their offensive would take. On 7 August 1943, the Japanese offensive plan gained approval and preparations began for operations to begin at the beginning of 1944. The offense would consist of two phases. In phase one, called Ha-Go, the Japanese would send two divisions north up the Arakan Peninsula. The Japanese believed this movement would cause the Allies to send their reserves down the Peninsula to counter the Japanese maneuver. The Japanese felt they could then fix these forces so they could not be used

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Figure 8. Second Arakan Campaign 1944

Source: Robert Lyman, *Slim: Master of War, 1942-1945* (London: Constable and Robinson Ltd., 2004), 297.

against the main effort of the second phase of the operation. In phase two, called U-Go, the Japanese would conduct two simultaneous attacks a couple of weeks after the start of Ha-Go. A supporting attack of two divisions would attack to fix Stilwell's forces in the north in order to ensure these forces could not counterattack into the flank of the main effort of Ha-Go. This main effort, consisting of two divisions, had the tasks of destroying all Allied forces around Imphal and seizing the key supply depots in the area, thus depriving the Allies of their springboard for their offensive into Burma.⁵⁰

This plan had some inherent risks to it. However, the Japanese were so confident in their superiority over the Allies they would assume these risks. The first risk was because of the distances involved, there would not be mutual support between the key Japanese formations. The Allies could exploit these boundaries, if they could find them. This was, however, a big if, considering the current state of Allied intelligence. The second risk (hinging on a gamble) was that the majority of forces would only take a limited amount of supplies with them on the attack and would not be resupplied by Japanese units. Slim states their rationale in the following comments,

The operation was planned to a strict time-table under which the total destruction of the British forces was billed to be completed in ten days. The Japanese arrangements were based on capturing our supplies and our motor transport by that time, and thence onwards using them. So confident of success were they that they brought with them, in addition to considerable artillery, units of gunners without guns to take over ours. None of our transport was to be destroyed; it was all wanted intact for the march on Delhi.⁵¹

Days after the Allies approved their final plans for their offensive, the Japanese did the same on 19 January 1944. The first phase of the offensive (Ha-Go) would start between the middle of February and early March to ensure a completion date by the mid-April, before the start of the monsoon season. In the upcoming days, the Japanese began

to get nervous as Slim's 15 Corps began making good progress down the Peninsula. This nervousness translated into action, when the Japanese decided to begin Ha-Go on 4 February, weeks early of their anticipated start.

Once again, the Japanese let their overconfidence greatly shape their decision-making abilities. In the original Ha-Go plan, they planned for two divisions to conduct the attack. At the beginning of February, only one division was available to conduct the attack. The Japanese decided that the one division was sufficient to draw in Slim's reserve and then fix it so it could not be used later at Imphal. The Japanese, when analyzing their opponent let their numerous early successes in Burma influence their opinion on their capabilities, or lack thereof.

This decision would have one other impact. The original plan had a gap of roughly two weeks between the start of the phases. The rationale was that Ha-Go would draw the reserves in and with U-Go coming on its heels there would not be sufficient time for the Allied forces to again move north and influence the battle. With Ha-Go moving up two weeks and U-Go still starting as originally scheduled, the gap was now at least a month. This gap would prove later to have a tremendous impact on the end result of the Japanese offensive.⁵²

The Japanese 55th Division began its attack at 2300 on 3 February 1944 with approximately 8,000 Soldiers (see figure 9). The 15 Corps had received numerous warnings of this attack almost two weeks earlier.⁵³ Yet, the Japanese achieved tactical surprise and within ten hours, the main body of the attack traveled a distance of twelve miles through very difficult terrain. It appeared that the Japanese had every reason to be

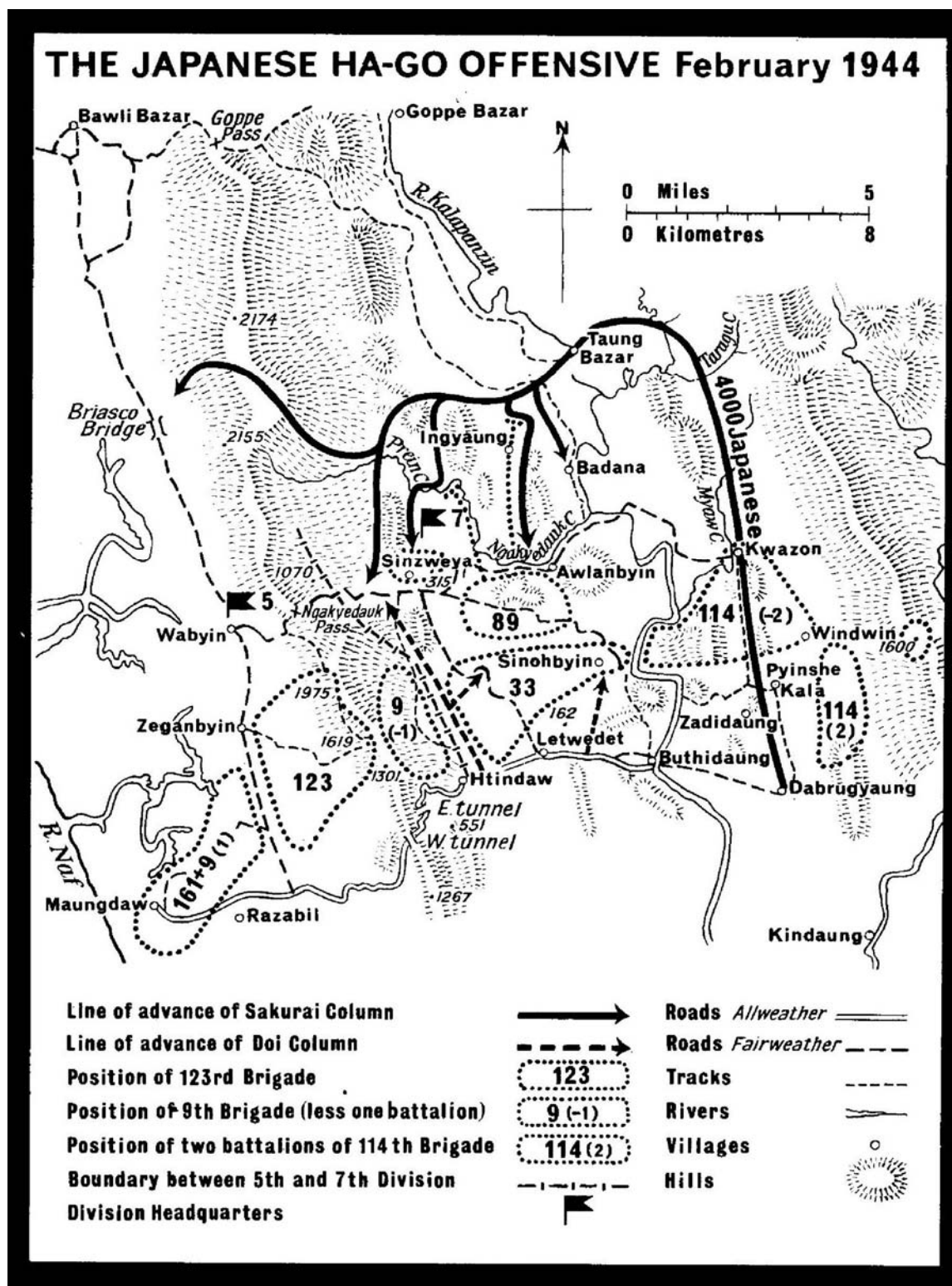


Figure 9. Japanese Ha-Go Offensive, February 1944
Source: Michael Calvert, *Slim* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 71.

over-confident and that even one division was more than enough to accomplish the task and purpose.

By 6 February 1944, the Japanese had fixed the British forward defenses held by the 5 and 7 Indian Divisions inflicting heavy casualties. As they were fixing at the front, the Japanese used the majority of their combat power to make a penetration on the eastern flank and begin to envelopment Slim's forces from the rear. In the past, these Japanese actions would be the signal for the British to immediately withdraw and abandon their defensive positions. However, this time, British leadership and improved Soldier morale and confidence would reverse this trend.

Slim told his commanders to immediately form a type of defense called an "administrative box." It was a tactic Slim had conceived over the past months. This type of defense is similar in thought to the U.S. Army doctrine of a strongpoint defense. In the administrative box, all units (including combat service support) would assume a 360 degree defensive perimeter to repel attacks from the enemy. In Slim's version of the concept, these units would be resupplied by air to ensure each unit had sufficient resources to continue its defense.⁵⁴

From 6 to 24 February 1944, Slim's administrative box repelled the Japanese attacks through the use of air and a new found confidence and fighting spirit displayed by his Soldiers (see figure 10). During this period, Slim sent two more divisions into the Arakan to engage the Japanese. This made a total of six divisions deployed in the Arakan to battle the single Japanese division. In total, almost 180,000 British troops were deployed into the peninsula, although not all of them were involved in combat.⁵⁵

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Figure 10. Japanese Attack on Arakan, February 1944

Source: Geoffrey Evans, *Slim as Military Commander* (London: D. Van Nostrand Inc., 1969), 138.

Finally on 24 February 1944, the Japanese 55th Division decided to withdraw south down the peninsula. At the time of the withdrawal, the Japanese were short of ammunition, many Soldiers were starving, and they had sustained over 5,000 casualties out of the 8,000 Soldiers who began the assault.⁵⁶ It would mark the first time the

Japanese had lost a major engagement to the British. Yet, despite the bleak outcome, the Japanese division had in essence accomplished the initial part of their purpose. They had persuaded Slim to send many of his reserve forces to meet the Japanese. Time would tell if they could fix these and ensure they could not influence the U-Go offensive.

For the British, the victory had huge repercussions. Geoffrey Evans sums up the importance of the victory for the British and Slim himself. He states,

The outcome of the “Second Arakan Campaign,” as it is termed was a great tactical victory for Slim. His ideas on how to defeat the Japanese and his training methods had proved correct; his foresight in preparing the ground organization for air supply to be available at short notice made it possible not only to dispense with lines of communication temporarily, but also to disorganise the Japanese plan from the beginning; although taken by surprise, his quick reactions put his reserves in motion with little delay; the use of a sledgehammer--26 and 36 divisions--to crack a nut had made certain of crushing the enemy. But above all, this victory had a tremendous effect on morale, for it had been proved beyond doubt that the Japanese were not invincible. It had been imperative that this first big battle fought by 14 Army should be a success and Slim, his officers and their men had won it.⁵⁷

In reading the words of both Mountbatten and Slim, it is obvious how important the victory was for them and their Soldiers. Mountbatten states, “The battle of Arakan marked the turning-point in our campaign in Burma, and set the pace for the battles that were shortly to follow on the Central front: where greater numbers, greater distances, and a much longer period of time were involved. For in this battle, what was virtually a new technique in warfare had been evolved, tried out, and vindicated; and the myth of the “Invincible Jap” was now exploded.”⁵⁸

Slim echoes Mountbatten when he states, “This Arakan battle judged by the size of the forces engaged was not of great magnitude, but it was, nevertheless, one of the historic successes of British arms. It was the turning point of the Burma campaign.”⁵⁹ He

adds, “It was a victory, a victory about which there could be no argument and its effect, not only on the troops engaged but on the whole 14 Army was immense.”⁶⁰

During the period of the Second Arakan Campaign, Slim was also seriously involved with his second operation, the use of the long-range penetration groups in the northern front. Before discussing these events, it is necessary to briefly review the history of the long-range penetration groups in the Burma Campaign. This review will include a discussion of their leader, General Orde Wingate and his relationship with Slim and the groups overall contributions in 1943, when deployed in Burma.

When Wingate arrived in Burma in 1942, he may have held two titles within the British Army, which many say he deserved. First, based on his performance in the early days of World War II, he was in many circles the most respected officer in the British ranks. Second, also based on his past performances, many considered him to be the most distrusted officer in the British Army.⁶¹ He was one of those men, either loved or hated, with no middle ground.

The arrival of Wingate into Burma was the idea of General Wavell. Wavell did this for two reasons. First, he wanted to see the feasibility of using some form of irregular or unconventional warfare against the Japanese. The British needed to look at different methods to combat the Japanese. This method of irregular warfare was the trademark of Wingate and he was clearly the British expert in that area. Second, Wavell simply wanted to stir the pot a bit with his senior leadership. There was not a better man to do that than Wingate.⁶²

After being in the country for a short period, Wingate and Slim met. They had crossed paths before early in World War II in East Africa (Abyssinia) and had discussed

the organization and practice of guerrilla warfare.⁶³ This discussion centered on the availability of Soldiers in the BurCorps who would be interested in volunteering to join a new unit Wingate was building to conduct a form of guerrilla warfare. Slim told Wingate that the majority of his Soldiers were not even trained to fight a conventional war, yet alone fight unconventionally. He believed Wingate's actions were a useless and unnecessary diversion in Burma and he did not have troops to spare him.⁶⁴

Slim's recollection of the meeting and his early thoughts regarding Wingate are discussed in the following passage:

With many of his ideas I was in agreement, but I doubted if methods based on his Abyssinian experience would succeed equally well against a tougher enemy and in country not so actively friendly. Wingate was a strange, excitable, moody creature, but he had fire in him. He could ignite other men. When he so fiercely advocated some project of his own, you might catch his enthusiasm or you might see palpable flaws in his arguments; you might be angry at his arrogance or outraged at so obvious a belief in the end, his end, justifying any means; but you could not be indifferent. You could not fail to be stimulated either to thought, protest, or action by his somber vehemence and his unrelenting persistence.⁶⁵

Despite Slim's lack of support, Wingate did receive two battalions worth of Soldiers. This came about chiefly because of the influence of Wavell. For the remainder of the year, Wingate trained his men hard and equipped them. For morale purposes and to give this diverse group something in common to identify with, he came up with a name for his unit. He chose the name Chinthes or Chindits, which was a mythical beast that stood as a statue in every Burmese temple.⁶⁶ With training, equipment and a name, the Chindits were ready to conduct operations against the Japanese.

On 13 February 1943, the Chindits launched their operation, codenamed Longcloth, with just over 3,000 Soldiers participating. They had four key tasks in their mission. They were to first to cut the Mandalay-Myitkyina railway, then cut the Japanese

lines of communication in northern Burma. After accomplishing these, the Chindits would begin harassing Japanese operations in the Shwebo area and finally, if they possessed sufficient combat power, cut the Mandalay-Lashio railway. These tasks were planned in conjunction with a Chinese offensive in the north, but the Chinese later pulled out of their commitment.

For three long months, the Chindits traveled some 1,500 miles in some of the harshest terrain in the world. At the end of the operation, 2,182 Soldiers out of the 3,000 who began the operation made it back into India. Of those who made it back, only six hundred of them were fit enough to fight again for the British.⁶⁷ The expedition was an awesome test of the physical and mental endurance for every Soldier.

Was the expedition worth the heavy price these Soldiers paid? This is a question frequently debated in any discussion regarding the Burma Campaign. For those who believe the operation was a failure they stress that the military gains were negligible. In terms of casualties, there were few on the Japanese side and in sheer numbers, they paled to those suffered by the Chindits. The damage inflicted by the Chindits on the road and railway network was quickly repaired and did not influence Japanese operations substantially.⁶⁸ Those on this side of the debate believe the price paid was too much for the results.

In the other camp are those who believe this operation was critical to the final outcome in Burma. They point to three significant contributions Longcloth made to future operations in Burma. First, was the significant use of air supply utilized during the operation. Many lessons were gleaned in this area and these greatly improved aerial supply later in the campaign. Second, although they suffered few casualties, the operation

planted the seed in the Japanese that perhaps their flanks were vulnerable. These thoughts inspired the Ha-Go and U-Go offensives, when the Japanese felt future operations by Wingate were in the offing. Finally, and possibly the most important contribution was the effect on morale within the Allied ranks and at home. The Chindits had gone against the Japanese and lived to tell about it. It was something that had not occurred before in the campaign.

The operation quickly became a propaganda weapon for the British. With months of bad news and defeats, a hero was needed to boost morale and offer optimism. The British press made Wingate that hero and he became an instant celebrity in Britain. No one desired a hero more than Churchill, who quickly jumped in the adulation of Wingate. This adulation would make for some uneasy moments for Slim in the upcoming months and severely challenge his leadership skills.

After Longcloth, Wingate basked in the limelight and used it to make his Chindits even stronger in terms of manpower and resources. The Chindits soon became formally known as the Special Force and treated as an independent formation. When Slim took command of the 14 Army, he also assumed direct command of the Special Force. By this time, the Chindits had expanded to six brigades and Wingate's demands continued to grow. In the months since the operation, Wingate made it known that the Chindits should be the main effort of the Allies offensive to retake Burma. He believed with air support he could sweep through south-east Asia and single-handedly retake Singapore as well.⁶⁹ In his mind, everything else was a shaping operation to ensure his success.

In early December 1943, as SEAC was finalizing their operational plans, Wingate was busy attempting to continue to build his empire. Wingate went to Slim and

demanding, not asked, for Slim's reserve division, the 26 Indian Division, for his use in the Chindits. During the discussion, Slim asked Wingate what his intentions were for his force. Wingate described his new philosophy on the preferred method for using his force. It called for the Chindits to now seize territory in what he called a "stronghold." This stronghold was a fortified rally point for his columns, protected by "floater" columns waiting outside the stronghold. These columns were prepared to attack any would-be enemy formation in the rear if the stronghold was attacked.⁷⁰

Slim listened to Wingate's ideas and requests and then told him he could not grant his request for the division. Slim needed his reserve so that he could personally influence the fight when he needed to. This answer was not good enough for Wingate and he immediately told Slim he would discuss the matter with Churchill.⁷¹ Not feeling the least bit intimidated, Slim describes his reaction, "I pushed a signal pad across my desk to him, and told him to go and write his message. He did not take the pad but he left the room. Whether he ever sent the message I do not know, nor did I inquire. Anyhow that was the last I heard of his demand for the 26th Division."⁷² However, in the future he would hear from Wingate on other matters.

Nearly the entire month of January 1944 was spent in finalizing the mission of Chindits in the future offensive. There were discussions, some heated, between Wingate and the SEAC leadership. The topics included command and control relationships, tasks for the Chindits, and as always, the request for more resources. Mountbatten and Slim tried their best to ease Wingate's tensions and not agitate him too much. When dealing with Wingate, there was always the "Churchill" factor. Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownall, Mountbatten's Chief of Staff, noted this risk in his diary entry for 28 January:

This will bring the PM straight down on to Giffard and Slim, for he has already expressed his doubts as to the quality of military advice that Mountbatten has been receiving. He will jump at any chance of breaking another general or two and will push very hard, and maybe successfully, to get Wingate installed in command of 14th Army--which would be a most dangerous affair.⁷³

After much deliberation, the operation code-named Thursday, was finalized, or as much as an operation involving Wingate could be (see figure 11). The final plan was not what Wingate wanted, yet it does not appear he discussed the matter with Churchill. The operation, in essence, called for Wingate to support Stilwell's operations in the northern front. They would cut off Japanese lines of communication to facilitate the attack.

Wingate had his task and purpose from higher. As good commanders do, Slim left the how, or concept of operation, to Wingate to plan. Wingate decided he would send one brigade on foot on 5 February 1944. Three other brigades would be transported via glider to three landing zones (Piccadilly, Broadway, and Chowringhee) on the nights of 5 and 6 March 1944.⁷⁴ The timing was such that the foot brigade would link up with the glider brigades in the area of Indaw. Once in place, they would set-up strongholds near Indaw and conduct operations.

Operation Thursday began as anticipated on 5 February 1944 with the foot brigade departing. The route utilized paralleled that of Stilwell's newly formed American special force organization. It was nicknamed "Merrill's Marauders" and Stilwell used them differently than the Chindits were used. Stilwell used them in combination with his conventional forces, where the Chinese conventional force would fix the Japanese and the Marauders would envelop that formation from the rear.⁷⁵

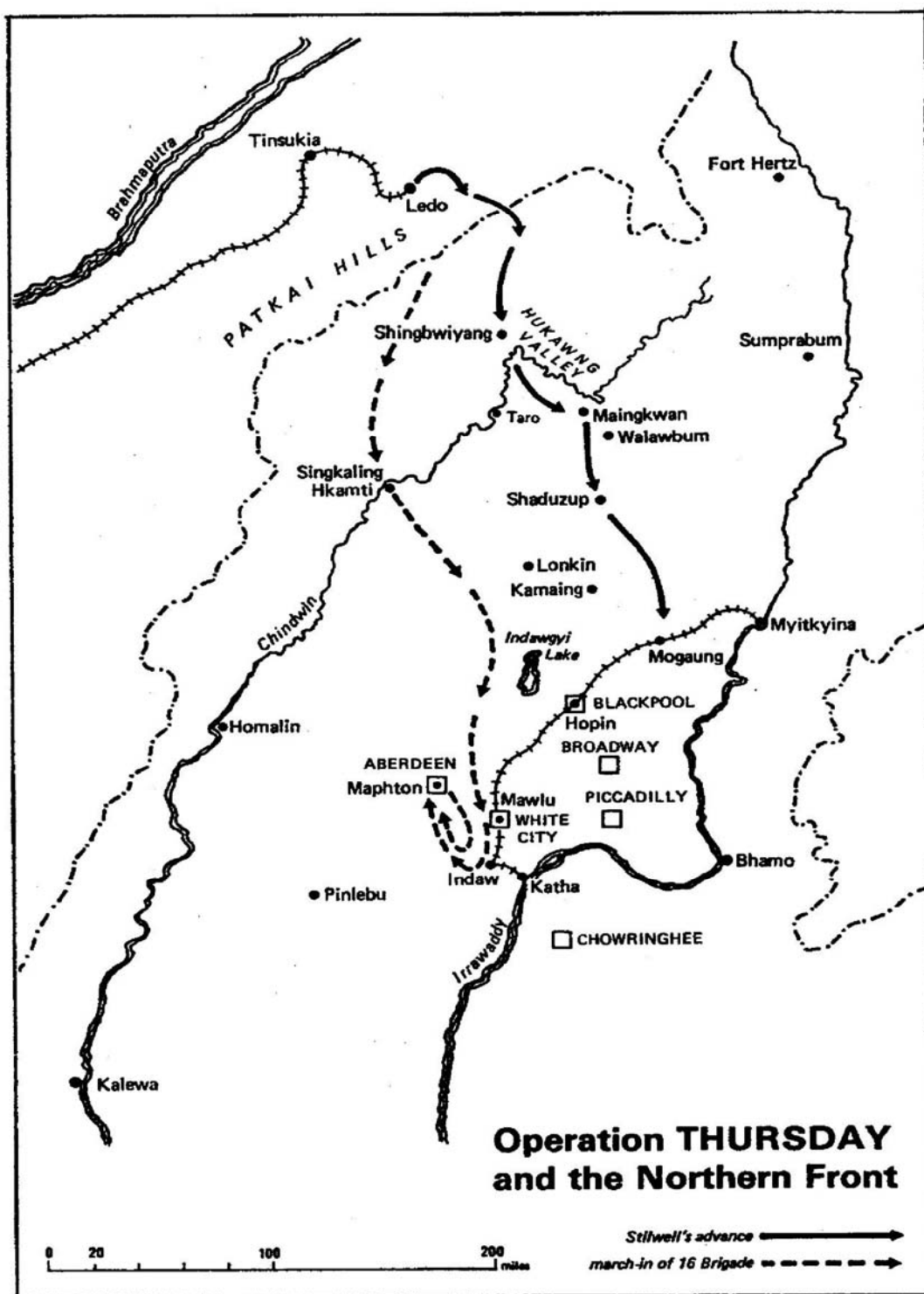


Figure 11. Operation Thursday, February 1944
 Source: Ronald Lewin, *Slim, the Standardbearer* (Hartfordshire, England: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 182.

From all indications, Thursday was going well for Wingate for the first month. However, things would change in the final hours leading up to the start of the glider movement. On 5 March 1944, Wingate held his final briefing for the movement with Slim and Major General George Stratemeyer, the commanding officer for the Allied Eastern Air Command in attendance. During the briefing, an officer arrived and showed Wingate a series of air photographs taken earlier that day of the future landing zones. Apparently, Wingate had not authorized any last minute reconnaissance of the area, so he was quite upset when the officer arrived.⁷⁶ Once Wingate got over his initial anger, he reviewed the photographs. The photographs of Piccadilly showed the entire landing zone covered with logs, making any potential landings practically impossible.

From there, the end of the incident has two entirely different endings. Some maintain that after reviewing the photographs and talking to his commanders, Wingate recommended to Slim that the mission would continue. The only change he recommended was that the gliders scheduled to land in Piccadilly would divert to landing zone Broadway.⁷⁷ The other version is that Wingate lost his composure and demanded that the entire operation be canceled since it was obviously compromised. He believed the Japanese were lying in ambush to slaughter the gliders coming into Piccadilly. In this account, Slim takes Wingate aside, calms him down and tells him he will take responsibility for continuing the operation.⁷⁸

So who is right and who is wrong? In the grand scheme of things, it probably is not that critical because in either case the operation continued. It does make for great debate among historians of the campaign and illustrates the high level of controversy related to anything associated with Wingate.

In terms of the outcome of the landing, the operation did not begin well for the Chindits. The first series of gliders had difficulties with towing cables, their towing planes overheating and poor landing areas. As casualties began mounting at landing zone Broadway; the commander on the ground aborted the mission. By that time all gliders were in the air. Of the sixty-two gliders used that evening, eight were able to be recalled, eight crash landed inside India, thirty-five landed at “Broadway” (of which all but three were wrecked or damaged) and the remaining eleven made forced landing in enemy territory. The casualty total was thirty Soldiers killed and thirty Soldiers wounded.⁷⁹

Despite the heavy casualties, over four hundred Soldiers landed on Broadway. These Soldiers quickly completed a new airstrip and prepared it for use the next evening. In the next seven days, the remaining two brigades successfully landed in the Indaw area. In total, 650 Dakota and glider sorties had landed inside Burma carrying over 9,000 men, 1,350 animals, two artillery batteries and 250 tons of supplies.⁸⁰ During this period, Slim would have new concerns as the Japanese began executing phase two of their offensive, U-Go.

U-Go was not a surprise for Slim. On 3 February 1944, just before the Japanese conducted Ha-Go, intelligence reported that the Japanese had intentions to attack forces in central India. The indicators for this assessment were the general reinforcement of fresh units in central Burma and an escalation of enemy reconnaissance activity on the 14 Army front lines. The intelligence community believed the Japanese would focus on the Imphal plain and cutting the Imphal-Dimapur road near Kohima. As stated before, the Japanese believed this area would be the start point for any future British offensive. With this area under their control, they could take any viable British offensive option away.

With an understanding of his unit, the terrain, and now the enemy, Slim and his staff began planning to counter the Japanese offensive. In looking at potential courses of action available to him, Slim saw three. First, he could keep his divisions in their current positions, which were not mutually supportive, and fight in administrative boxes. This would be similar to how his divisions fought in the Arakan Peninsula. Additionally, he would use a large reserve force located near Dimapur to counterattack the Japanese at the decisive point of the operation.

In analyzing this course of action, Slim believed it had two key weaknesses. First, his units had not trained on air supply operations and the rough terrain in which most units occupied did not facilitate these operations. Second, if he left the divisions where they were currently located, there would be little security for the majority of the logistical support, positioned in the Imphal plain.⁸¹

Slim's second course of action was to quickly conduct a spoiling attack against the Japanese before they conducted their U-Go offensive. This course of action had the strength of being offensive and the capability of quickly seizing the initiative. As Slim states, it

had all the glamour of boldness. Indeed, there were wanting senior visiting officers who urged me "to fling two divisions across the Chindwin." I am afraid they left my headquarters thinking I was sadly lacking in the offensive spirit, but somehow I have never had great confidence in generals who talk of "flinging" divisions about. "Fling" is a term for amateurs, not professionals. Besides, I noticed that the farther back these generals came from, the keener they were on my "flinging" divisions across the Chindwin.⁸²

In terms of weaknesses of the course of action, Slim believed there were two. The first was he believed at this early stage of this operation, his units were simply not ready to attack the Japanese. For morale purposes, he needed early victories and realistically

this action did not afford him this opportunity. The second weakness was that the attack would require his units to operate on a supply line running over one hundred miles.⁸³ This may have played to a Japanese strength of getting behind friendly lines and destroying rear areas.

The third course of action was to concentrate his forces in the Imphal plain (where his logistics were located) and fight an attrition battle with the Japanese until Slim felt he could transition to the offensive. This course of action had several strengths for Slim. First, he and his commanders would choose the specific ground in which the fight would take place. The Imphal plain possessed some open terrain, which would enable Slim to exploit his advantage in air and armor. Second, the units could protect their logistical bases and thus, have short supply lines, which would be critical in an attrition battle.⁸⁴ Third, Slim could mass his combat power and mutually support his defenses.

With these strengths, the course of action did have a critical risk associated with it. This was the necessity for Slim to keep a substantial amount of combat power forward of the Imphal plain to gain and maintain contact with the Japanese. At a certain period, these units would conduct a withdrawal to their defensive positions on the Imphal plain. These units would have to ensure that they did not become decisively engaged with the enemy and consequently, not be able to withdraw back to these positions. If this happened, the defense would lose its strengths of mass and mutual support. Additionally, the requirement for these forces to fall back may have an adverse effect on morale. To the Soldiers, this action may insinuate that the forces were in danger of being overrun by the Japanese. For many, this would bring back painful memories of the humiliating withdrawals of 1942 and 1943.

After reviewing the alternatives, Slim met with his 4 Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Geoffrey Scoones. Scoones had the preponderance of the combat power in the area, three divisions, and his corps would provide the vast majority of units for any of the three courses of action. Slim states the conclusion of that meeting, “Scoones and I discussed the alternatives and we both came independently to the same conclusion--to fight at Imphal.”⁸⁵

With a decision made, Slim and Scoones immediately began planning the specific details. Most of the details of the plan came fairly quickly, however, both men were concerned about the early withdrawal phase of the plan. As mentioned earlier, the risk with this course of action was the withdrawal of the forward units back to Imphal and specifically the timing of it. Slim describes his thoughts on planning the withdrawal in the following passage: “The essence of all military planning is timing. A brilliant plan wrongly timed, put into operation too early or too late, is at the best a lame thing and at the worst may be a disaster. When and by whom was the order for the 17th and 20th Division to retire on Imphal to be given?”⁸⁶

As had so often happened in the past, the assessments on the timing of Japanese operations were wrong. With the 14 Army anticipating a Japanese attack on 15 March 1944; the Japanese once again achieved surprise by beginning the U-Go offensive on 7 March. It was yet another instance in the campaign where the Japanese quickly seized the initiative and Slim would have to react.

It is no easy feat to analyze the Japanese U-Go offensive and the Allied actions to counter it in a simple logical flow. As Slim states,

The story of the prolonged and hard-fought battle of Imphal-Kohima that developed from the plans of Japanese and British commanders is not easy to follow. It swayed back and forth through great stretches of wild country; one day its focal-point was a hill named on no map, the next a miserable, unpronounceable village a million miles away. Columns, brigades, divisions, marched and counter-marched, met in bloody clashes, and reeled apart, weaving a confused pattern hard to unravel.⁸⁷

Perhaps, the best way to look at the battle is the way Slim, himself, dissects it. In his memoirs, he divides it into four phases, which he feels are relatively clear. Phase one is concentration in which each side maneuvered its forces to gain positional advantage over their opponent. Phase two is the attrition fight as each side strived to wear his opponent down. Phase three is the counter-offensive, in which the 14 Army succeeded in wearing down its opponents and began their own offensive. Phase four is the pursuit period where the Japanese began withdrawing from the Imphal plain and the 14 Army pursued them into Burma.⁸⁸

In reviewing the actions of the concentration phase, the start point is the initial maneuver of the Japanese. The Japanese scheme of maneuver divided their area of operations into three zones. The first activity began in the south on the night of 7 March 1944. At this time, the Japanese 33rd Division (a shaping operation) began its attack to isolate the 17 Indian Division in order to prevent it from influencing the Japanese decisive operation in Imphal (see figure 12).

As stated earlier, the attack caught the 4 Corps off-guard. By 10 March, the Japanese 33rd Division had infiltrated behind the 17 Indian Division and the 20 Indian Division, which was located around the town of Sittang. Not until 13 March, did 4 Corps leadership truly believe the Japanese offensive had begun. By this time, the great fear of

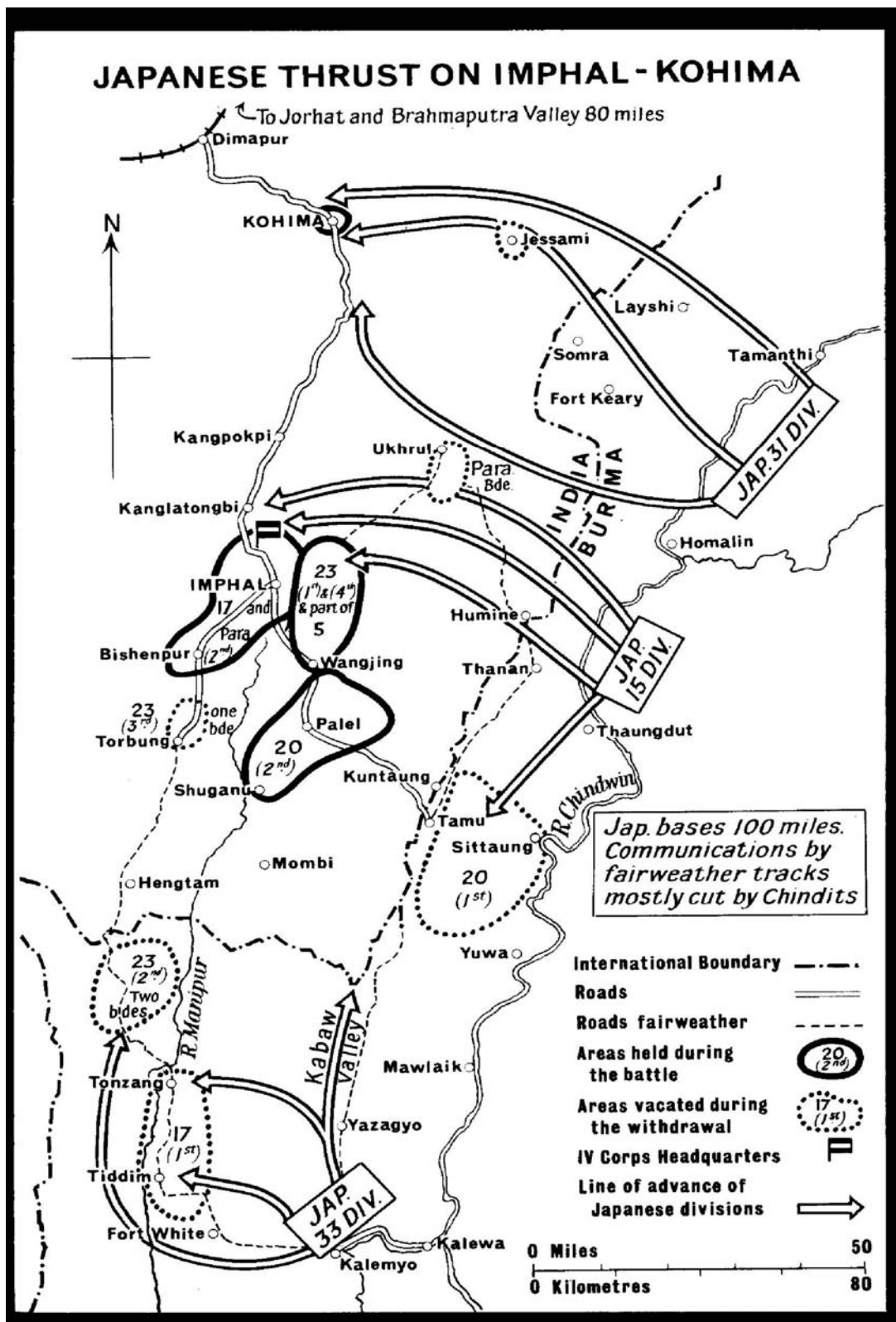


Figure 12. Japanese Thrust on Imphal-Kohima
Source: Michael Calvert, *Slim* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 91.

Slim had come to reality; his forces which were scheduled to withdraw had become decisively engaged.

The entire matter of who would authorize the beginning of the withdrawal to Imphal was a subject for debate during the planning process. It appears Slim wrestled with either authorizing the local commander on the ground to make the call or that he would dictate a date to the 4 Corps Commander when the divisions should be in place in their final defensive positions. In retrospect, Slim discusses his thought process and hindsight in the following passage:

I was, in my mind, convinced that a Japanese offensive on a large scale against Imphal was coming, and I judged it would begin about 15th March. On the other hand, it was impossible to be absolutely certain that it would come then, or even that it would come at all. If we pulled back to Imphal and it did not come, not only should we look foolish, but we should have unnecessarily jeopardized the preparations for our own offensive, abandoned much territory, and done nothing to help the Chinese advance in the north. The effect on morale could not but be bad. I therefore decided that all preparations to put the plan into force should be made, but the word to start the withdrawal to Imphal should be given by the local commander, Scoones, when he was sure that a major Japanese offensive was imminent. What I should have done was to act on my own judgment, and give a definite date early in March on which the withdrawal should begin, and another, some days later, by which the two divisions should be in their new positions. To put the responsibility on local commanders was neither fair nor wise.⁸⁹

Did Slim make the right decision in placing the withdrawal authority with Scoones? The thesis will debate that later, but the effect was that Scoones did not order his two division commanders (17 and 20 Indian Division) to withdraw until 13 March 1944. Both commanders implemented their withdrawal plans, but it became quickly obvious that the 20 Indian Division would have the easier task. With only one or two minor problems, the 20 Indian Division made it safely back to their defensive positions by 21 March 1944 without any units being cut-off.

To the south, things were much different for the 17 Indian Division. For some reason, Major General ‘Punch’ Cowan, the division commander, did not give the withdrawal order to his battalions until almost twenty-four hours later. Along with this order, he told his commanders to destroy all surplus supplies. In both accounts, Cowan had not told his commanders beforehand, that these were on-order missions.⁹⁰ Consequently, there was a great deal of confusion and chaos at the unit level. While Cowan was giving his orders, he would soon discover that the Japanese were entrenched on his withdrawal route to Imphal.

By the evening of 14 March 1944, the 17 Indian Division was formed and ready to execute its withdrawal. In total, it had 16,000 men, 3,500 mules, and 2,500 vehicles lined up on the withdrawal routes.⁹¹ In order to make it to the Imphal plain and its final defensive positions, the division would have to destroy Japanese roadblocks located near the beginning of its route, maneuver through numerous ambushes and make a river crossing. It was a daunting task.

The division immediately used highly effective airstrikes and artillery to destroy the roadblocks. The secondary effect from these fires was the motivational value it had on the Soldiers. Possessing new-found confidence, the division used fire and maneuver to make its way north along the withdrawal routes. Finally, on 26 March 1944, the entire division made it across the Manipur River and blew the bridges, thus isolating it from the Japanese. Two days later, the division was in its defensive positions on the Imphal plain.

As the 17 Indian Division conducted its withdrawal, Mountbatten, Giffard, and Slim made numerous movements of uncommitted forces to shape the battlefield. These included airlifting a division from the Arakan Peninsula, since the Japanese had

withdrawn, to positions near the Imphal plain; placing the 33 Corps under Slim's control, and placing the two uncommitted Wingate brigades (not used in Operation Thursday) under theater control. Additionally, in the northern front, Stilwell offered to stop his offensive to move forces to Imphal. Slim, however, determined it was not necessary and let Stilwell and Chinese continue to, more or less, operate independently. With these moves taking place, the attrition phase of the battle was beginning.

Before discussing this phase of the battle, another event took place requiring Slim's leadership and a difficult decision. On 24 March 1944, Wingate was killed in a plane accident. Although his loss would have been critical at any time, it was especially significant during this period for two reasons. First, Slim was right in the middle of overseeing the crucial withdraw of the 17 Division and directing the movements of reserve units to reinforce the Imphal plain. Second, Operation Thursday was in full execution with the Chindits operating in Japanese territory. The Allies hoped that the Chindits could cause enough confusion in the rear area to affect the Japanese attack on Imphal. Would the loss of Wingate put these operations in jeopardy?

Slim knew he had a difficult decision in naming a successor to Wingate and also knew he had to make it very quickly. Slim did not make the decision by himself. He consulted fellow Chindits and friends regarding Wingate's replacement. He found that many believed that Wingate had designated them as his successor.⁹² After gathering the data, Slim choose Wingate's most senior brigade commander, Brigadier General Joe Lentaigne. It was a name few had mentioned as a successor and most said he would not have been Wingate's choice.⁹³

There are numerous theories on why Slim choose Lentaigine. Burma Historian Louis Allen gives the following theory, “Lentaigine, like Slim, was a fellow Gurkha officer, and Slim wanted someone with the same regimental background as himself, who would not be so painfully difficult and unorthodox as Wingate, and would not threaten him with telegrams direct to Churchill whenever his desires were thwarted.”⁹⁴ In describing his rationale, Slim simply said that Lentagaine was the most balanced and experienced of Wingate’s commanders.⁹⁵

Whatever the exact reasons, when Lentagaine took command of the Chindits, a change took place within the organization. It appears the spark fizzled and the attitude emplaced by Wingate in his Soldiers began to slowly go away. Again, Louis Allen describes Lentaigine’s effect on the Chindits and their contributions during the rest of the war when he states, “Under his command, the momentum slowed, and the great concept dimmed. In the end, the Chindits were villainously misused, and he was powerless to prevent it.”⁹⁶ Slim would deal with the Chindits and Stilwell in the upcoming months, but with his naming of Wingate’s successor, he could now focus on the attrition phase of the battle.

As the battle shifted from concentration to attrition, it appeared Slim had survived two critical errors. First, they had miscalculated the beginning of the Japanese offensive and the strength of their forces. They had once again, been surprised by the Japanese. Second, Slim’s withdrawal to the Imphal plain was late. This very nearly cost him two divisions and in all probability would have led to direct defeat for the 14 Army.

Although there was fighting between the two forces along an arc of over 180 miles, the attrition battles generally focused on the areas of Kohima/Dimapur and Imphal.

These were the areas of key terrain for both sides. For the British, they facilitated future operations east into Burma and within the areas were located the key logistical nodes for the attack. For the Japanese, these areas would facilitate operations further west into India, especially if they could secure and then utilize the logistical nodes.

In reality, the fights for Kohima/Dimapur and Imphal were one large fight directed by Slim. These attrition battles began almost simultaneously with the Japanese attacking the Kohima-Dimapur area on 5 April 1944 and the Imphal area on 6 April 1944. Again, for the sake of clarity it is best to look at each separately, but to remember their connection. It was a unified battle that affected resource decisions and unit movements for each side.

The composition of the British forces defending the Kohima/Dimapur area was finalized by Slim and SEAC on 28 March 1944. At that time, Slim estimated that the Japanese could reach Kohima by 3 April 1944 and Dimapur by 10 April 1944. The distance between the two towns was approximately fifty miles. Slim knew with his present force, which consisted of little more than a brigade, he could not defeat any significant Japanese attack. He asked Giffard and Mountbatten for additional forces and he quickly received them.

The forces received by Slim included the 2 British Division, four separate brigades (including one of Wingate's uncommitted long-range penetration brigades), and the 33 Corps headquarters, commanded by Lieutenant-General Montagu Stopford to command and control the defense. Stopford flew into Kohima on 28 March and immediately began planning his defense. His orders from Slim were to focus on Dimapur first, since a critical rail hub was located there and intelligence believed Dimapur was the

decisive point of the operation for the Japanese. The defense of Kohima would be second in the priority of effort.

With this intent, he shifted the one brigade currently on the ground, the 161, from Kohima to Dimapur on 31 March 1944. This brigade had earlier been airlifted by Slim to Kohima from the Arakan Peninsula on 29 March 1944, to plug a potential gap in the 14 Army defense. The removal of the 161 Brigade left the defense of Kohima relegated to mainly combat service support Soldiers and two companies of infantry Soldiers. Slim, in his memoirs states that it was a huge mistake moving the 161 Brigade from Kohima to Dimapur. He believes if it had remained in position at Kohima, it could have delayed the Japanese attack for days and changed the future dynamics of the Kohima battle.⁹⁷

Days later, on 4 April 1944, elements of the 2 British Division arrived in Dimapur and Stopford decided he could afford to send the 161 Brigade back again to Kohima. The Soldiers of 161 Brigade were not excited about moving back and to put it in the terms of the Soldier, felt they were being jerked around. Despite their emotions, they followed orders and began the trek back to Kohima. Almost immediately, they began meeting hordes of panic-stricken Soldiers and refugees. The 161 Brigade managed to reach Kohima on 5 April 1944, as Japanese preparatory fires were landing on the town. One day later, the Japanese 31st Division, under the command of Lieutenant General Sato Kotokui, began their assault on the town. As the British were to find out, it was Kohima, not Dimapur, that the Japanese had their sights on.

Many historians believe the Japanese decision to focus on Kohima versus Dimapur was a grievous error and was a great contributor to their eventual defeat. Burma Historian Donovan Webster states, "In the end, the aborted attack on Dimapur may rank

as the greatest missed opportunity in Japan's invasion of India.”⁹⁸ Slim agrees stating, “All the Japanese commander had to do was to leave a detachment to mask Kohima, and, with the rest of his division, thrust violently on Dimapur.”⁹⁹

By 9 April 1944, the Japanese 31st Division had most of Kohima under its control. Slim determined that the seizure of Kohima was indeed the decisive operation of the Japanese 31st Division. At this time, Slim determined that Kohima should have the priority over the Imphal battle on all classes of supply.¹⁰⁰ Stopford agreed with the assessment and decided to counterattack with the 2 British Division from the north, since there was little activity in Dimapur. As the 2 British Division continued to move to Kohima, the British forces in Kohima continued to bend, but not break, against heavy Japanese attacks.

Finally, on 18 April 1944, the momentum of the Japanese attack stalled. At the same time, the leading elements of the 2 British Division arrived in Kohima. The advantage was now on the side of the British forces. From this date until 3 May 1944, serious fighting took place, as the Japanese still aspired to seize the initiative from the British. It was on 3 May 1944, after conferring with Slim, that Stopford and the 2 British Division Commander, Major-General J.M.L. Grover decided they were now in position to begin offensive operations against the Japanese.

From this period on, both sides attacked each other in action that was reminiscent of a boxing match. Kohima historian, David Rooney describes the action in the following words:

This was the start of the second main phase of the Kohima battle, which was to last from 3 May until 2 June, and in which every unit in the division would be involved in prolonged and bitter fighting against Sato's 31st Division. It was a

period of considerable confusion because battalions were moved away from their brigades when urgent action demanded it, and several battalions lost so many men that they had to be amalgamated with other battalions.¹⁰¹

As the battle raged during the days of May, General Sato and his commander, Lieutenant General Mutaguchi Renya, the Commander of the Japanese 15th Army, began having serious arguments over the Japanese prospects for victory in Kohima. These arguments involved numerous subjects including Sato's believe that Mutaguchi was meddling too much in his affairs and providing insufficient logistical support.

The biggest difference between the two leaders was the fact that Sato knew the Japanese were defeated in Kohima and did not want to suffer any more casualties while Mutaguchi wanted to keep sending more Japanese Soldiers into the fight and disregarded their fate. Rooney states, "Sato considered that Mutaguchi was prepared to sacrifice soldiers' lives for his own ambition and his insatiable craving for publicity."¹⁰²

As the month of May ended, the British continued to inflict huge casualties upon Sato and the 31st Division. Sato asked to withdraw to the east so he could resupply his units. As expected, Mutaguchi ordered him to stay and threatened him with court-martial if he disobeyed his orders. Finally on 31 May 1944, Sato disregarding his own future, began withdrawing his units out of Kohima. He wrote later, "We fought for two months with the utmost courage and have reached the limits of human fortitude. . . . Shedding bitter tears I now leave Kohima."¹⁰³

With Sato's decision, the battle for Kohima was officially over. Fighting still continued in the area, but a British victory was clear. It was a costly victory for the British, as they suffered over 4,000 Soldiers killed or wounded.¹⁰⁴ The losses were even more severe in the Japanese 31st Division, as 3,000 Soldiers were killed, 4,000 were

wounded, and many were unaccounted for.¹⁰⁵ Just as important, the mystique of the invincibility of the Japanese Soldier was lost in the town of Kohima.

As stated earlier, while the vicious fighting at Kohima was taking place, Slim and the 14 Army were fighting another brutal battle in the Imphal plain. With the arrival of the 17 Indian Division into Imphal on 28 March 1944, the 4 Corps defense was complete with four divisions located in the area. The corps was disposed in depth and dug in on all main avenues of approach into the Imphal plain, on a 90-mile arc.

These forces soon faced the brunt of two Japanese divisions in the upcoming days. The Japanese 15th Division attacked from the east and north into Imphal. The Japanese 33rd Division attacked from the west and south into Imphal. The 33rd Division was the same division that had initiated the U-Go campaign and forced the 17 Indian Division to withdraw.

With the Japanese moving upon Imphal, Slim now had the conditions he wanted in conducting a battle of attrition with the Japanese. First, he had a significant Japanese force committed (two divisions) to fighting in the area. Second, he had sufficient forces (well over four divisions) in place to fight against the Japanese. Slim had the advantages of a defender, plus a significant advantage in pure combat power. These factors would benefit any commander desiring to fight a battle of attrition. Finally, it was becoming quickly obvious that the Japanese attack plan and mentality was likewise focused on attrition, not maneuver.

In fighting a battle of attrition on the Imphal plain, Slim and the 4 Corps had two key advantages. First, the terrain, unlike the majority of areas fought during the entire campaign, was relatively flat and was not dense jungle. This would facilitate the use of

Slim's armor, his superiority in combat aircraft, and strength in artillery to inflict Japanese casualties. Second, the terrain facilitated the use of air supply by the 14 Army. This became a huge factor as fighting continued, since the 14 Army was able to get the supplies needed to fight, while the Japanese supply system became almost nonexistent.

Describing the battle for the Imphal plain is just as difficult as discussing the battle for Kohima. It was highlighted by combat in numerous locations with a mixture of units and constant shifts in momentum and initiative. In describing the fighting, Slim used the analogy that the Imphal plain was the hub of a wheel with six unevenly spaced spokes (routes) that connected it to the rim. These spokes or routes were: (1) from the north, the Kohima road, (2) from the north, a foot-path down the Iril River Valley, (3) from the north-east, the Ukhrul road, (4) from the south-east, the Tamu-Palel road, (5) from the south, the Tiddim highway, and (6) from the west, the Silchar-Bishenpur track.¹⁰⁶

On 29 March 1944, soon after the 17 Indian Division had completed its withdrawal, the Japanese began their initial assault to seize the town of Imphal. They quickly controlled parts of each of the spokes and consequently, surrounded the town of Imphal. This was achieved with elements of the Japanese 15th Division maneuvering to the north of Imphal and cutting off principally the road connecting Imphal with Kohima. This was critical because based on the fighting in Kohima, the 14 Army main supply route was now closed. This had significant ramifications for Slim's forces in Kohima and Imphal. In conjunction with this, the 33rd Division continued movement from the south and positioned forces to the west of Imphal. With these movements, the Japanese effectively had a 360-degree circle around Imphal, although the 4 Corps had positioned

additional forces outside the Imphal plain for use in counterattacks. Slim and the 4 Corps would soon utilize these forces to break this initial Japanese grip on Imphal.

During the month of April 1944, the fighting focused on control of the routes into the Imphal plain, which controlled the Imphal plain itself. Slim describes this fighting in the following passage:

The fighting all round its circumference was continuous, fierce, and often confused as each side manoeuvred to outwit and kill. There was always a Japanese thrust somewhere that had to be met and destroyed. Yet the fighting did follow a pattern. The main encounters were on or near the spokes of the wheel, because it was only along these that guns, tanks, and vehicles could move. The Japanese would advance astride the route, attack our troops blocking it, and try to outflank or infiltrate past them. We should first, hold, then counter-attack, and the struggle would sway a mile or two, one way and the other. All the time our airman, who played so vital a part in these battles, would be daily in sortie after sortie delivering attacks at ground-level and hammering the enemy's communications right back into Burma. Gradually, we should prevail, and, driven from the spokes of the wheel, the Japanese would take to the hills between them. Relentlessly, we would hunt them down and when, desperate and rapid, they turned at bay, kill them. This pattern repeated itself along each of the spokes as, on one after the other, we passed from defence to offence.¹⁰⁷

During this fighting, Slim focused on the use of air to ensure the 4 Corps had sufficient supplies to fight the attrition battle with the Japanese. Until the middle of April 1944, Slim was not able to fully utilize the capabilities of air supply because of the many commitments the Air Transport Command had in the theater, especially in northern Burma with Stilwell. Finally, on 18 April 1944, after much negotiation, Slim was able to significantly increase his apportionment of the air supply sorties. On this date, the Allies began Operation Stamina, which would become the greatest air supply operation in the history of the war. Between April 18 and June 30 1944, over 12,500 reinforcements and almost 19,000 tons of supplies were flown into the British front lines. With these men and supplies, Slim could fight the battle of attrition he wanted against the Japanese. Not

only did these airplanes bring critical supplies in, but they were able to evacuate 13,000 casualties and over 43,000 non-combatants. Slim could not have defeated the Japanese without the use of air supply.¹⁰⁸

This was in direct comparison to the logistical situation of the Japanese. As highlighted earlier, one of the key assumptions the Japanese made was that U-GO would end quickly in favor of the Japanese. Consequently, they could then take over the supply caches of the 14 Army. Based on this, Mutaguchi supplied his forces with meat on the hoof--in the form of thousands of cattle and oxen. After weeks of moving through the jungles and mountains to get to Imphal, the livestock began dying of disease and exhaustion. As the livestock died, so did the majority of the Japanese capability to transport supplies and their primary source for food.¹⁰⁹

By the middle of May 1944, Slim was much more comfortable with the situation around Imphal than that at Kohima, although there was growing optimism there as well. In Imphal, the combination of air in both the supply and combat functions, the use of accurate artillery, and the fact that the Japanese could no longer effectively supply their forces added up to a feeling of confidence throughout the 4 Corps. Slim states,

By the middle of May 1944, therefore, my worst anxieties were over. The Japanese 15th Division had been well hammered and was losing cohesion. To the south and west, where the redoubtable 33rd Japanese Division was being reinforced from both their 53rd and 54th Divisions, there was still the prospect of a last attempt by the enemy. Our command of the air over the whole battlefield was virtually unchallenged and, thanks to this and to the daring of our patrols, the enemy supply system was falling into confusion. Most significant, too, the monsoon was almost upon us.¹¹⁰

Although Slim's optimism was rising, the month of May 1944 did have its share of outside situations that required his attention. The first situation occurred on 4 May 1944, when Slim received two pieces of news dealing directly with the logistical situation

within 4 Corps and his Army as a whole. First, Scoones, the 4 Corps Commander, told Slim that even though Operation Stamina was delivering supplies to his units, the quantities were not sufficient. Based on Scoones' calculations, he would have to take desperate measures if the main supply route between Kohima and Imphal was not opened by mid- June. Additionally, Mountbatten informed Slim that the British Chiefs of Staff wanted the return of seventy-nine transport aircraft for use in other operations. These aircraft were loaned earlier in March to assist Slim in the initial days of U-Go.

Slim did not have to plead his case to Mountbatten about the importance of air supply and the criticality of seventy-nine aircraft in keeping the initiative against the Japanese. Mountbatten agreed and refused to redirect the aircraft. He then took the battle to Churchill and was able to convince him of the need to keep the aircraft under SEAC control. However, it was not until the middle of June that the number of air supply sorties improved for Slim. By that time, the monsoon was in full force and partially negated the effect of the increased numbers.

In the middle of May 1944, the Chindits once again required his attention and his diplomatic skills. Since the death of Wingate, the Chindits had continued to support Stilwell's operations in the northern front. The Chindits were still under Slim's control, but Slim had little influence on the activity on the northern front and with Stilwell.

On 17 May 1944, Slim gave operational control of the Chindits to Stilwell. This was done primarily to tighten the command and control structure in the northern front.¹¹¹ This decision had immediate repercussions as Stilwell and Lentaigne quickly disagreed on the future of Chindits. Stilwell wanted the Chindits to immediately continue to operate in the north in support of his operations. This was the exact opposite view of Lentaigne,

who believed his unit was now combat ineffective due to illness and fatigue. He believed his Soldiers needed a period of rest before undertaking any more operations. It did not take long for the disagreement to escalate higher.

During the next week, Stilwell informed Mountbatten that Lentaigne had disobeyed his orders to conduct a specific operation. Stilwell felt he could no longer command the Chindits and wished they would be detached from his organization. Mountbatten listened to Stilwell's concerns regarding the Chindits. After he made his arguments, he told Slim to travel up to the northern front and clear up the matter.¹¹²

During the period of 6 to 12 June 1944, Slim shuttled between his own headquarters and those of Stilwell, Lentaigne, and his two corps commanders fighting in Kohima and Imphal. Slim discussed the matter with Lentaigne and then met with Stilwell. Slim listened to Stilwell's concerns and then rebutted many of his claims. Slim then describes what happened next, "Finally, looking at me over the top of his glasses, he said, 'What do you want me to do?' I said, 'See Lentaigne, talk things over with him, give his columns a chance to get out their casualties and reorganize, and keep his force on until Myitkyina.' He agreed, and I returned to headquarters."¹¹³

Although this seemed to defuse the situation a bit, tempers erupted again between Stilwell and Lentaigne at the end of June 1944. This time, Mountbatten went to discuss the matter personally on 30 June 1944. Mountbatten decided to have Soldiers medically examined and those deemed unhealthy evacuated to India. Consequently, two brigades were taken out from under Stilwell's control and moved to India. However, Stilwell continued to twist this order to meet his needs and eventually kept the other two brigades until late August when they too finally withdrew to India. Months later, Mountbatten

officially disbanded the organization. These last months put an unfortunate ending to a proud organization.

Slim's last "crisis" in May came on 27 May 1944 when Mountbatten informed Giffard that the Chiefs of Staff were not happy about the 14 Army's progress in opening the main supply route between Kohima and Imphal. Mountbatten's words to Giffard were, "I know from discussion that you realize the vital need for opening the Kohima-Imphal road as quickly as possible but really must ask you when you can start your offensive north."¹¹⁴ Mountbatten's well-chosen words, told Giffard that he wanted the 4 Corps to focus on opening the road and not on the attrition of the enemy in the Imphal plain.

Giffard knew Mountbatten's intent was not in congruence with Slim's intent. Slim's thoughts on the subject follow: "Although the road would have to be opened within the next five or six weeks, the immediate object of this offensive would be not so much the relief of Imphal--that would be incidental--but the destruction of the Japanese Fifteenth Army."¹¹⁵ There was no mistaking Slim's intent: it was to inflict as many casualties as possible on the Japanese, thus setting the conditions for the reconquest of Burma. Giffard readdressed the issue with Mountbatten and a compromise was reached. Mountbatten gave Giffard and Slim until mid-July to open the route. It appeared this date would satisfy the desires of the Chiefs of Staff to open the route as soon as possible and Slim's desire to focus on attrition as long as possible.

Slim received his orders on 9 June 1944 regarding the opening of the route. Coincidentally, his forces began making substantial progress in re-opening the route. By 18 June, the lead elements of each corps were forty miles apart from each other on the

Kohima-Imphal route. Finally on 22 June 1944, vehicles from the 33 Division coming from the north and the 4 Corps traveling from the south met on the route. The route was now open after a period of almost three months and this signaled the end of the Japanese offensive. Slim stated the importance of the event when he wrote, “The Imphal-Kohima battle, the first decisive battle of the Burma campaign, was not yet over, but it was won.”¹¹⁶

Although the road was now open, the Japanese continued a valiant, but, ultimately a hopeless attempt to obtain their initial objectives. Finally, on 8 July 1944, Mutaguchi and the Japanese leadership started their withdrawal and officially ended the U-Go offensive. These land defeats at Kohima and Imphal were the greatest ever suffered by the Japanese.

Not only were the Japanese unsuccessful in achieving their goals, but they additionally took heavy casualties. Again, determining accurate casualty figures for the Japanese are difficult. Many experts believe the most reliable figures are those of Louis Allen, who spent many hours studying Japanese records.¹¹⁷ Based on Allen’s research, out of a starting strength of nearly 100,000 men, the Japanese had over 59,000 casualties compared to just over 17,000 for the British.¹¹⁸ Of the Japanese casualties, 13, 376 died versus approximately 4,000 for the British.¹¹⁹ Each side took the preponderance of these casualties in the attrition battles around the Imphal plain. Those who escaped death, suffered from various wounds, disease, and malnutrition.

Along with the human losses, the Japanese lost the majority of the tanks, artillery pieces, (Slim estimates the British captured over 250 pieces)¹²⁰ and equipment they brought to battle. Of the three divisions that took part in the offensive, two (the 15th and

31st) were now combat ineffective requiring massive reorganization efforts. Most importantly for the British were the intangible losses the Japanese suffered in morale and confidence.

Once again, Slim gives a superb review of the Kohoma-Imphal battle and an honest appraisal of his performance in the following words:

If you are a general, whether your army has won a great battle or lost it, it is hard not to slur over your own mistakes, to blame others for theirs; to say, if you lost, what bad luck you had, and, if you won, how little luck had to do with it. My army had indubitably won this battle and I look back now on its conduct with considerable personal satisfaction, allowing myself, in the warm glow of success, a good deal more credit, no doubt, than I deserved. Yet the plan of the Imphal battle had been sound and we had adhered to it. Basically, it had been to meet the Japanese on ground of our own choosing, with a better line of communication behind us than behind them, to concentrate against them superior forces drawn from the Arakan and India, to wear them down, and, when they were exhausted, to turn and destroy them. All this we had done in spite of my mistakes in mistiming the withdrawal of the 17th Division from Tiddim and underestimating the strength of the Japanese thrust at Kohima.¹²¹

With the Japanese now beginning to withdraw, it was up to Slim to capitalize on the situation and quickly transition to the offensive. Despite the fact that it was in the middle of the monsoon season, it was necessary to keep pressure on the Japanese. He saw a window of opportunity that was there to exploit. As in the past, Slim strongly believed that the key task of all future operations should be the destruction of Japanese forces in Burma. The frustration Slim would have was that his future plans were not necessarily synchronized with those above him. His superiors influenced by political factors, saw different means and ends when they looked at Burma.

These political factors were revealed as early as 3 June 1944, when the Combined Chiefs of Staff sent Mountbatten a directive on future planning for the 1944-1945 campaign. This directive focused entirely on tasks relating to China and not Burma.

Specifically, they regarded the criticality of the air link to China and the development of overland communications (logistics) from India into China. Based on this heavy “Chinese” flavor, it would appear that the interests of the United States were currently superceding those of Great Britain.

With this initial directive, Mountbatten’s planners came up with two alternative plans. The first plan, code-named “X,” focused almost entirely on Northern Burma. In this operation, Stilwell’s forces, acting as the main effort would attack east and seize a final objective near Bhamo. The 14 Army would attack east from Imphal to the Chindwin River as a shaping operation to support Stilwell. Additionally, SEAC would conduct an airborne operation to seize terrain around Wuntho as a shaping operation. The end state of these operations was occupation of Northern Burma down to Kalewa and Lashio.¹²² In analyzing this plan, it was obvious the intent was terrain focused and not enemy focused as Slim desired.

The second plan, code-named “Y,” was much more focused on the enemy and on Central Burma. In this operation, the 14 Army would conduct the decisive operation by attacking across the Chindwin River to seize key terrain near Mandalay. Stilwell’s forces would attack essentially south as a shaping operation until they conducted link-up with the 14 Army. In this plan, airborne operations would seize Kalewa and the entrance to the Mandalay Plain to facilitate future operations. This plan was more in line with Slim’s thinking, but still did not address Japanese forces south of Mandalay to Rangoon. After some discussion, this was partially addressed when a combined airborne and seaborne assault was added to seize Rangoon. However, at the time sufficient assets were not available to conduct the seaborne portion of the attack.¹²³

On 23 July 1944, Mountbatten recommended to the Chiefs of Staff that a combination of Plan Y, which he now called “Capital,” and the airborne and seaborne attack on Rangoon, which he now called Dracula, could accomplish the desired end state. In making this recommendation, he did include his concerns in the areas of supply, timing, the upcoming monsoon season, and the availability of aircraft and ships. The latter was daily becoming more of a concern as planning for the Normandy invasion continued.

Six days later, on 29 July 1944, Giffard gave planning guidance for Slim to execute Capital. In his guidance, Giffard broke Capital into three phases. In phase one, the 14 Army would seize Kalewa and Kalembo, which required a river crossing of the Chindwin River. In phase two, the 14 Army would continue the attack east to seize key terrain around the Ye-U-Shwebo area. In the final phase, the 14 Army would continue the attack east to secure Burma down to the Mandalay.

While receiving this guidance, Slim continued to pursue the withdrawing Japanese forces. In the upcoming days, his forces had completed the exploitation of Imphal and driven the Japanese back to the Chindwin. This operation was difficult due to the monsoon conditions, which negatively affected every task attempted. However, the mindset of continuing to conduct operations despite the monsoon was radically different for the British forces. As discussed earlier, the standard operating procedure in past monsoon seasons was to completely cease operations. This was not the case during the monsoon season of 1944. Slim did not and would not lose contact with his opponent.

On 16 September 1944, Mountbatten received an updated directive regarding future offensive operations. The directive appeared written to appease Mountbatten in

regards to focusing on the destruction of the Japanese. However, it contained caveats, which ensured that the true focus was still securing the air and land logistical routes to China. The initial paragraph of the directive read: “Your object is the destruction and expulsion of all Japanese forces in Burma at the earliest possible date. Operations to achieve this object must not, however, prejudice the security of the existing air supply route to China, including the air staging post at Myitkyina and the opening of overland communications.”¹²⁴

Despite the tone of the directive, Slim believed the quickest way to achieve the desired end state was the destruction of the Japanese Army in Burma. As Slim continued his pursuit and destruction of the Japanese, decisions made on 12 November 1944 would have a serious impact on Slim’s organization and himself. These were decisions effecting his task organization, command and control relationships, and his personal relationship with key senior leaders in theater.

On 12 November 1944, the Combined Chiefs of Staff approved the formation of the Allied Land Forces, South-East Asia (A.L.F.S.E.A.) with Lieutenant-General Oliver Leese assuming command. Leese was brought in from the British 8 Army, which was fighting in Italy. This new command structure would replace the 11 Army Group, which would now dissolve.

A.L.F.S.E.A. was created for one principal reason, to develop some type of command and control structure over the entire Allied effort. Specifically, some form of command and control was needed to oversee the operations on the northern front. In the past, as discussed earlier, Stilwell and the Chinese received little or no oversight. With

the creation of A.L.F.S.E.A., there was a now a structure in place to integrate the operations of the British, Americans, and Chinese.

The creation of A.L.F.S.E.A. had great significance for Slim for many diverse reasons. First, with the reorganization, Slim would now command two corps, the 4 and the 33. Second, the 15 Corps would now fall under the control of Leese and operate in the Arakan Peninsula. It would conduct shaping operations in support of the 14 Army. Third, the recently formed Lines of Communication Command, which controlled the administrative and logistical functions in theater, was pulled from Slim's oversight and put under Leese. This eased the burden on Slim and enabled him to focus on the fighting his corps. Fourth, the departure of Giffard and arrival of Leese changed the leadership dynamics dramatically for Slim. The departure of Giffard ended a very close and successful relationship of over fifteen months between Giffard and Slim. Slim greatly respected Giffard and made these comments regarding his departure: "He had seen us through our efforts to become an army and through our first and most desperate battles. Fourteenth Army owed much to his integrity, his judgment, his sound administration, his support in our darkest hours, and to the universal confidence he inspired among us. We saw him go with grief. I and others built on the foundations."¹²⁵ Finally, on the same day A.L.F.S.E.A. was created, Stilwell, after months of tension between himself and Allied leadership, was replaced in all his duties by the American leadership. Because of his numerous responsibilities, three men were brought in to take over the various positions he held. Although Stilwell's departure did not have huge ramifications for Slim, it was obviously a relief to the British leadership who had experienced a stormy relationship with Stilwell. This could only help to improve overall Allied cooperation.

The creation of A.L.F.S.E.A. could not have come at a better time for Slim. At a period when he had the proverbial too many irons in the fire, he needed some relieve from his overall responsibilities. After two and a half years of fighting this campaign, his energy level had to be dwindling somewhat. With A.L.F.S.E.A. and Leese now taking over some critical responsibilities, Slim would now have one main focus and task. For the remainder of the campaign, he would concentrate all his energy on the destruction of the Japanese Army. Slim's intent for the upcoming months is stated below:

My orders were to drive the enemy out of a considerable part of Northern Burma and take Mandalay, but more important than the occupation of any area or any town, was the destruction of the Japanese Army. A second great defeat for that army, properly exploited, would disrupt it and leave, not Mandalay, but all Burma at our mercy. It, therefore, became my aim to force another major battle on the earliest feasible moment.¹²⁶

In determining where this major battle would take place, Slim considered the terrain, the enemy, and his own forces. His desire was to persuade the Japanese to fight in relatively open terrain, but utilize the Chindwin and Irrawaddy to take away the maneuver options from his opponent. In the open terrain, he could exploit his advantages in armor and combat aircraft. He also believed the Japanese would fight desperately to defend Mandalay and use the terrain to shape this defense. With these considerations, Slim decided he would fight the Japanese in the Shwebo plain. This plain was a large area enclosed between the two rivers, located northwest of Mandalay. Although Slim choose the Shwebo plain, he would soon find out that as always, the enemy had their own plan.

Although there was no specific start date to initiate this phase of the offensive, it essentially began on 3 December 1944. On this date Slim's forces began crossing the Chindwin River (see figure 13). As the offensive began, Slim's two corps could produce

four and two-thirds divisions and two tank brigades. On paper, this force should have contained six and two-thirds divisions, but maintenance problems and transport challenges cut dramatically into the 14 Army's offensive strength. Slim's intelligence reports indicated that the principal Japanese force opposing him totaled five and one-third infantry divisions, an independent mixed brigade, and one tank regiment.¹²⁷ Looking at force ratios it appeared the two opponents were fairly even. However, the combat multipliers and all the intangibles were squarely on Slim's side.

In the initial days of the fight, Slim's forces seemed to make good progress in movement. However, in the area of inflicting casualties, the 14 Army was not having the early success it desired. The key reason for this was that the Japanese had not arrayed their forces as Slim had anticipated.

Soon after crossing the Chindwin, Slim began to realize the Japanese were not executing the course of action he developed his plan upon. He states:

I had begun to suspect that I had misread the Japanese commander's intention. Now I realized I had. If he had meant to fight the Shwebo plain, he would undoubtedly have held on to these hills with more determination. Since the beginning of the month, too, I had been getting reports, confirmed by air reconnaissance, that the general direction of the Japanese movement in the river loop was back across the Irrawaddy, not forward. Then, too, the defensive positions captured by the 19th Division in the defiles did not seem designed for prolonged resistance, but for delay only. We had surprised the enemy by the speed with which we had mounted our offensive over the Chindwin, and by its strength and swiftness. It was borne in upon me that, either because of this, or because I had all along mistaken the enemy's intention, he was not going to do what I had expected--fight a major battle north of the Irrawaddy. It looked as if this battle, like so many of mine, was not going to start quite as I intended. It was time for me to use a little of that flexibility of mind that I had so often urged on my subordinates.¹²⁸

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Figure 13. Advance to Chindwin

Source: Robert Lyman, *Slim: Master of War, Burma 1942-1945* (London: Constable and Robinson Ltd., 2004), 303.

Slim was now faced with a dilemma that commanders continue to face today. Do I fight the plan or do I fight enemy? It was a critical decision for Slim, but one that was perhaps made easier for him because of his overarching intent. Slim was entirely focused on the destruction of the enemy. He determined if he continued to fight his plan; he would not only jeopardize his end state, but perhaps give the initiative back to the Japanese.

On 16 December 1944, Slim had his Chief of Staff send a telegram to A.L.F.S.E.A. regarding the 14 Army future intentions. The telegram was in essence a warning order, informing A.L.F.S.E.A. that Slim would scrap his original plan to execute Capital (see figure 14). Based on his new estimate of the situation, he would give his higher headquarters the new plan as soon as possible. There was no question, Slim was undoubtedly fighting the enemy and not the plan.

With the Japanese now defending east of the Irrawaddy, Slim had an additional essential task to complete before engaging the main defensive belts of the Japanese. The 14 Army would have to conduct one of the most difficult operations in combat, an opposed river crossing. Slim had to ensure that not only would the river crossing be successful, but its crossing would place his forces in positional advantage to attack the main Japanese defensive belt. Mountbatten confirmed this by stating, "The task of the Fourteenth Army would remain the same; but its accomplishment had now become very much more difficult, for in order to reach the battlefield we now had to cross a great river which the enemy was holding throughout its length in considerable strength."¹²⁹

Ronald Lewin gives this analysis on the courses of action available to Slim,

To attack the Japanese around Mandalay frontally across the Irrawaddy would be suicidal, and never entered Slim's mind. To wheel his army so as to cross the river and come in on their northern flank would be an administrative nightmare, if not an impossibility. In any case, such an operation offered none of the rich strategic rewards promised by the more daring plan, which Slim in fact adopted--and christened EXTENDED CAPITAL.¹³⁰

Many have called Extended Capital the boldest British plan of World War II.¹³¹

What follows is Slim's description of this plan,

My new plan, the details of which were worked out in record time by my devoted staff, labouring day and night, had as its intention the destruction of the main Japanese forces in the area Mandalay-Thazi-Chauk-Myingyan. It was based on 33 Corps, with the 19th Division transferred to it, forcing crossings of the river north and west of Mandalay, thus drawing towards itself the greatest possible concentration of Kimura's divisions. Meanwhile 4 Corps, moving secretly south up the Gangaw Valley, would suddenly appear at Pakokku, seize a crossing, and, without pause, strike violently with armoured and airborne forces at Meiktila.¹³²

Again, Ronald Lewin gives the following analysis and summary of the plan,

EXTENDED CAPITAL was an exquisite example of the dictum of Clausewitz: "Everything is very simple in war, but the simplest thing is very difficult. These difficulties accumulate and produce a friction which no man can imagine exactly who has not seen war." For the essence of the plan was simplicity itself. The Japanese were evidently nervous about Mandalay. With a whole Corps, therefore, Slim decided to convince them that his main assault would come over the Irrawaddy in this sector. Meanwhile, blanketed by this deception, a second Corps would assemble further south, strike unexpectedly across the river and make at headlong speed for Meiktila, the ganglion, or nerve-centre of Japanese operations in Central and Northern Burma. That critical area secured, all enemy resistance along the upper Irrawaddy must crumble, and the 14th Army would be poised for EXTENDED CAPITAL'S second phase--the race for the sea to capture a port in Southern Burma, Rangoon or perhaps Moulmein, before the arrival of the monsoon in May threw Slim's extended communications into chaos.¹³³

In analyzing the plan, many factors come to the forefront as critical to assisting in mission accomplishment. First, Slim had to ensure his forces were secure. If the Japanese discovered the location of the 4 Corps, the plan would be compromised. Of course,

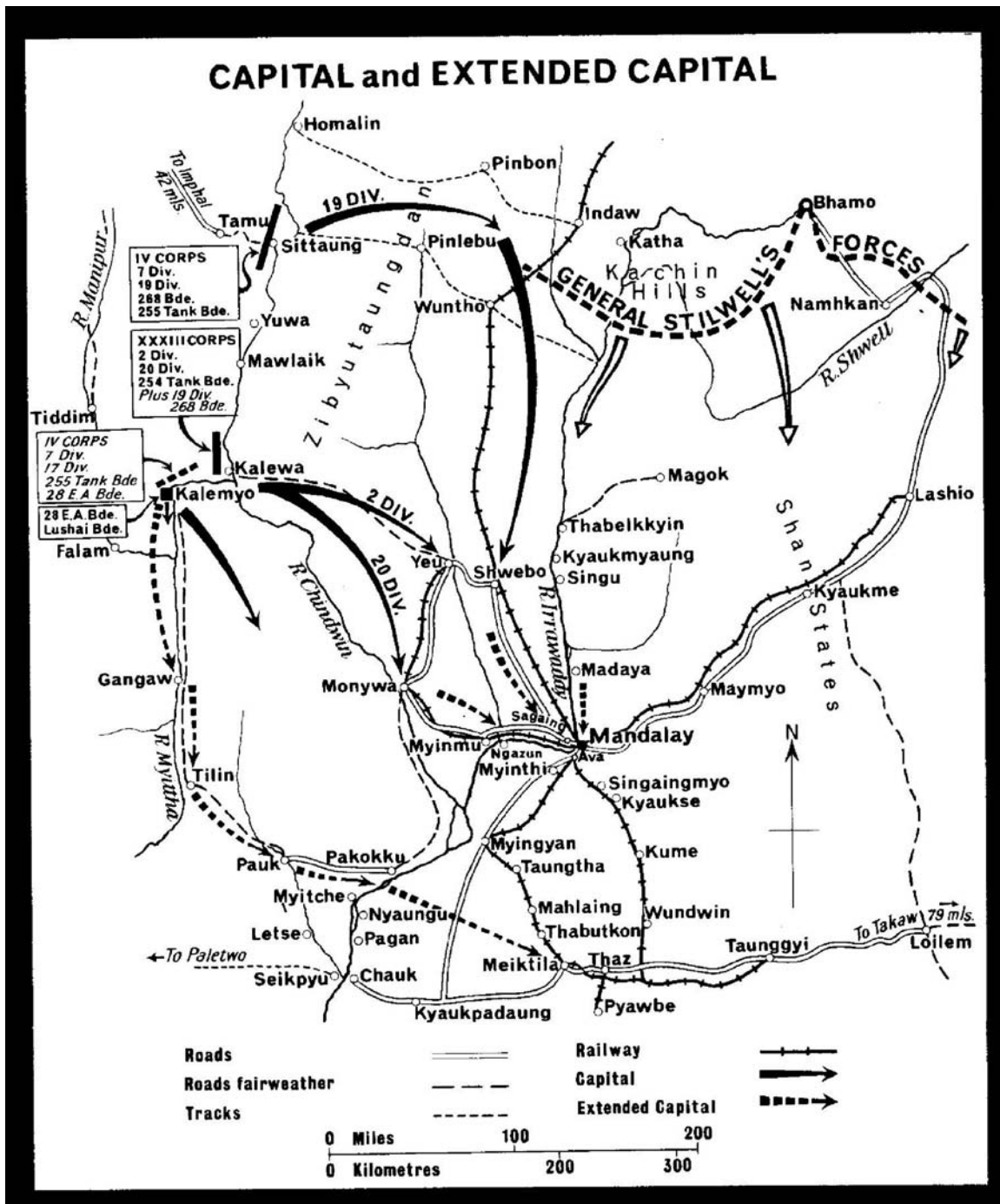


Figure 14. Capital and Extended Capital
Source: Michael Calvert, *Slim* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 137.

hiding an entire corps is easier said than done. Second, relating directly to the first factor is an effective deception plan. Slim had to create a viable story and sell it to the Japanese leadership. Third, the timing of the maneuver of the two corps had to be synchronized. The moving of one of the corps too early or too late, would allow the Japanese the opportunity to effectively react to the plan. Fourth, the logistical system must be in place not only to support this part of the operation, but to support the transition of the maneuver to the south in the second phase.

On 17 December 1944, Slim sent Leese a telegram summarizing the key aspects of the plan. Three days later, on 20 December 1944, Slim sent Leese a detailed appreciation of the plan. Mountbatten quickly received the appreciation from Leese. He made the following comments regarding the plan and its preparation:

Lieut.-General Slim's plan, of which Lieut.-General Leese and I entirely approved, was as brilliant in its conception as in its subsequent successful execution; for it laid the foundation for the complete destruction of the Japanese Army in Burma. It was a bold plan, relying for its fulfillment on secrecy, on speed, and on taking great administrative risks. Planning and execution had to be completed in rather less than two months...¹³⁴

With the plan approved, Slim now had to prepare his army for its execution (see figure 14). His first task was developing the necessary task organization needed to accomplish the operation. The 33 Corps, which was moving west to east towards the Irrawaddy River, would consist of the 2, 19 and 20 Divisions and two brigades (254 Tank and 268). The 4 Corps moving south from Imphal would consist of the 7 and 17 Divisions and three brigades (255 Tank, Lushai, and the 28 East African). Slim would keep the 5 Division as the Army Reserve. The task organization became effective on 26 December 1944.

During this period, units continued to maintain contact with the Japanese and to get into positions to execute the operation. The key piece of the reorganization and movement of forces involved the 19 Division. The 19 Division, which was assigned to 4 Corps, was now part of 33 Corps. Its movement would be part of the elaborate deception plan Slim would institute.

In this deception plan, Slim wanted to sell the Japanese that he was sending both corps to attack Mandalay from positions north of the city. His deception story was that the 4 Corps would attack from Tamu east to Pinlebu, then maneuver due south to the Shwebo plain and into Mandalay. The other half of the equation was that the 33 Corps would attack from Kalewa east to the Shwebo plain and then link-up with the 4 Corps attacking south to seize Mandalay.

The key to the deception effort was establishing a dummy 4 Corps headquarters at Tamu. As the 19 Division moved from Tamu to Pinlebu it passed all its message traffic to the dummy headquarters. If the 33 Corps wanted to give orders to the 19 Division (since it was in reality part of that organization), it passed them through the 4 Corps dummy headquarters. While the 19 Division was moving to the east, the real 4 Corps was moving in radio silence south to get into positions to attack Meiktila. Critical to the entire deception plan and movement was the use of attack airplanes. Their role was to ensure the Japanese could not send out their own aircraft to track the true movement of the 4 Corps.

Slim further elaborates on the deception efforts in the following comments:

“Indiscreet” conversations in clear between staff officers and operators were arranged, news broadcasts made slightly inaccurate references to formations engaged, and many ingenious devices were employed to mislead the simple

Japanese, while the volume of traffic was made to conform to having both corps concentrated in the Shwebo plain. Operationally this signal deception was a real annoyance to corps and divisional commanders and its enforcement a test of patience and discipline, but it paid an excellent dividend. The enemy was completely deceived.¹³⁵

During the month of January 1945, the 14 Army continued to set the conditions for its attacks on Mandalay and Meiktila. By 11 January 1945, the 19 Division had made huge progress in its movement. It had first accomplished the west to east movement from Tamu to Pinlebu and had then completed the southern movement from Pinlebu to the crossings sites of the Irrawaddy at Thabeikkyin in the Shwebo plain. As the Japanese were focused on the 19 Division, Slim moved two other divisions from the 33 Corps west to east into the Shwebo plain. Slim had now planted in the Japanese leadership's mind that one corps was to the north of the Mandalay and another west of Mandalay, both poised to strike.

As the Japanese were fixed on Mandalay, the 4 Corps began its movement south from Tamu on 19 January 1945. Slim had given it a target date of 15 February 1945 to be across the Irrawaddy River. By 26 January 1945, it had made excellent progress and according to its timetables was four days ahead of schedule. At the beginning of February, the 4 Corps was closing in on the Irrawaddy River and had still not encountered any organized enemy resistance. The reason for this was the Japanese were continuing to focus around Mandalay and did not have any intelligence assets monitoring the 4 Corps movement.

This movement could have easily been compromised if the Japanese would have been able to confirm a report an aircraft (one of few which the Japanese sent for reconnaissance because of Allied air superiority) gave in late January. Lieutenant-

General Nobuo Tanaka, the commander of the Japanese 33rd Division which would later oppose the 4 Corps, relates the following story,

At the end of January, our aircraft reported a long line of vehicles on the road from Tilin to Pauk, but these were not considered as part of a powerful mechanized force, nor was it regarded as important by Army Headquarters. If the information had been repeatedly reported by our aircraft, it would have received more attention, but as they only reported it once, it did not attract special attention.¹³⁶

As February 1945 began, it was obvious that the deception was successful. During this time, the 14 Army took a short pause to establish and develop airheads and bring forward logistics. Additionally, in the first week of February, sketchy intelligence finally came to the Japanese that indicated movement of forces south of Mandalay. With these reports, the Japanese were now on the horns of a dilemma. Do they reorient forces to the south to face these forces or do they continue to keep their strength in the defense of Mandalay? After some discussion, the Japanese assumed this movement was simply a diversionary attack and the 14 Army decisive operation was still the seizure of Mandalay.

After the brief logistical pause, Slim continued operations according to his plans. In the south, the 4 Corps continued its movement and on 16 February 1945 it opened a bridgehead approximately 6,000 yards wide and 4,000 yards deep on the Irrawaddy River near the town of Nyaungu. The opening of the bridgehead constituted the fiercest fighting the 4 Corps had seen during the operation. By 21 February 1945, the 4 Corps had secured the bridgehead line and began to breakout of the bridgehead enroute to Meiktila.

The 4 Corps faced some determined enemy opposition the next week in its movement to Meiktila. However, at the end of February 1945, the lead elements of the 17 Division were on the outskirts of Meiktila. On 28 February 1945, the 17 Division began its assault on Meiktila by attacking along four avenues of approach. Although, there are

some discrepancies on the amount of Japanese Soldiers actually defending the city, there was no debate on the intensity of these Soldiers. After three hard days and nights of fighting, Meiktila was seized on 4 March 1945. Losses were significant for the Japanese as over 2,000 soldiers' bodies were counted.¹³⁷

The loss of Meiktila was significant to the Japanese physically and psychologically. Physically, the 14 Army now owned key terrain, which afforded maneuver to the north to Mandalay and to the south if it wanted to seize the ports. Mentally, it was a devastating blow to the morale and confidence of the Japanese leadership. These two factors combined to force the Japanese to react and make hasty decisions. The critical decision was to divert units moving to the defense of Mandalay to now counterattack Meiktila.

Slim's thoughts on the importance and summary of the battle of Meiktila follow,

The capture of Meiktila in four days and the annihilation of its garrison-for, as the Japanese themselves admitted, hardly a man escaped-was a magnificent feat of arms. It sealed the fate of the Japanese army in Burma, and it came as a terrible surprise to Kimura. He had been completely misled as to the location of our 4 Corps and as to the strength and intentions of our troops in the Pakokku area. At first he had no idea what this force, which had struck such a grievous blow at his vitals, was, but he did realize at once the fatal danger he would be in if he could not quickly recover Meiktila. Kimura, unlike many Japanese commanders, had always reacted speedily and boldly to changed situations. Once again, he did so.¹³⁸

These actions and decisions will be discussed later in the chapter.

During February 1945, the 33 Corps continued to move to Mandalay. Critical to this movement was seizing the bridgeheads over the Irrawaddy River. With the focus of the Japanese on the defense of Mandalay, they spent the majority of their combat power trying to deny the 33 Corps these bridgeheads. As Slim stated, "He wisely concentrated his defenses at the most likely crossing places, watched the intervening spaces, and held

his reserves, especially artillery and tanks, mobile and well back, until our intentions were clearer.¹³⁹ Consequently, with both forces considering the Irrawaddy River critical to success; the entire month of February was spent fighting over the bridgeheads. This was intense fighting, but by the end of the month, the 33 Corps controlled the Irrawaddy River. It was now ready to begin its assault on Mandalay.

To summarize the British attack, the situation on 5 March 1945 was as follows. In the south, the 4 Corps had seized Meiktila and was pushing forces outside the city for defensive purposes. In the north, the 19 Division of the 33 Corps was driving south to take Mandalay from the north. It additionally had conducted a link-up with the Chinese forces in the northern front. The 2 and 20 Divisions of the 33 Corps had crossed the Irrawaddy and were driving east to take Mandalay from the east and south.¹⁴⁰ The Japanese forces were in serious trouble, but they still had plenty of fight in them, as the month of March would show.

On 7 March 1945, the 33 Corps began their final assault of Mandalay. On this date, the 2 and 20 Divisions continued to attack from the east to seal the southern portion of the city. Sealing the southern portion was critical since the 14 Army did not want the Japanese to add any additional combat power to their defenses near the southern ports of Burma. At the same time, the 19 Division attacked from the north to seal the eastern and northern portions of the city. The 33 Corps used the Irrawaddy River to seal the western portion of the city. These actions were accomplished very rapidly and the divisions began advancing into the city.

As the 33 Corps began its assault, it found very light resistance in the southern and the western portions of the city. Consequently, the 2 and 20 Divisions seized their

individual objectives by 14 March 1945 without suffering many casualties. It was an entirely different story for the 19 Division as it attempted to seize its objectives in the northern and eastern portions of the city. In the northeast portion of the city was an area called Fort Dufferin.

Fort Dufferin was a strongpoint for the Japanese. It was a walled (twenty-three feet in height), one square mile enclosure containing government offices and the headquarters to the city's railway station. It was surrounded by a forty-foot moat with bridges in five different locations. As can be envisioned, Fort Dufferin was a formidable fortress, which would require a combined arms approach in order to seize it.

In the days that followed, the 33 Corps used artillery, 500-lb bombs, and massive infantry attacks to break down the defenses of Fort Dufferin. Time and time again, the infantry tried to scale the walls, but was unsuccessful. Finally, on 19 March 1945, three B-25 (Mitchells) with 2,000-pound bombs, made an experimental attack against the walls called skip-bombing. In this technique, the bombs were aimed to strike the water of the moat from a low-level and then skip forward to explode against the wall.¹⁴¹ This attack proved successful and blew a fifteen-foot hole in the wall.

The next day, two squadrons of Thunderbolts attacked the north wall of Fort Dufferin. The infantry immediately followed and entered the fortress. The Soldiers found the fort empty and learned that its defenders had exfiltrated out the night prior. With Fort Dufferin seized, the rest of the city quickly fell. On 21 March 1945, the city of Mandalay was in British hands and the 33 Corps focused on ensuring Japanese forces did not escape from the city to reinforce the southern port defenses.

As stated earlier, the 4 Corps seized Meiktila on 4 March and the Japanese wanted to quickly retake the town. On 6 March 1945, corps units began making sweeps outside the city to attrite Japanese forces and set the conditions to attack to the south to seize the southern ports. These forces immediately discovered that they faced formidable numbers of Japanese. From these encounters, it was easy to surmise that the Japanese were themselves setting the conditions to retake the city. They needed Meiktila to open up a withdrawal route to the southern ports.

Therefore, Slim decided on 9 March 1945 to send his theater reserve, the 5 Division, to augment the IV Corps. This was a significant risk for Slim in committing his reserve. However, he realized how critical Meiktila was to both sides. The division arrived on 17 March 1945 to assist the 4 Corps. By the middle of the month, the Japanese had sent all available combat power to retake Meiktila and had surrounded the 4 Corps. Again, Slim knew additional reinforcements were needed and flew-in another brigade from the north to assist the 4 Corps on 15 March 1945. This unit immediately began fighting as the Japanese attempted to seize the Meiktila Airfield.

For the next two weeks, intense fighting occurred throughout the Meiktila area. Day by day, the 4 Corps inflicted heavy casualties upon the Japanese. As the casualties mounted, the Japanese ambitions to retake Meiktila dwindled. Finally, on 1 April 1945 the Japanese leadership began withdrawing to the south. It would now attempt to build a formidable defense around the southern ports and hope the monsoon rains of May would slow down the 14 Army.

The start of the Japanese withdrawal marked the end of phase one of Operation Extended Capital. It was a tremendous victory for Slim and the 14 Army, produced by

superb planning, preparation, and execution. Slim received many accolades for the performance. Perhaps, the most meaningful to him, was given by his Japanese counterpart, General Heitaro Kimura, the commanding general of the Burma Area Army. Kimura, when asked about the Mandalay-Meiktila battle, stated it was “the masterpiece of Allied strategy” in the battle of Burma.¹⁴²

Despite the praise, Slim knew his task was only halfway complete. In order to complete the reconquest of Burma, the southern port of Rangoon must be in British control. As throughout the entire campaign, Slim would have to defeat three elements before achieving success. First, although the Japanese were not the same force that started the campaign over three and a half years before, they still possessed quality, passionate, Soldiers. As Geoffrey Evans stated, “Despite the fact that all enemy formations were thoroughly disorganized, lacked supplies and had lost most of their equipment, they could still, because of the courage and tenacity of the Japanese Soldier, be a danger.”¹⁴³ Second, the terrain again would not be an ally. There were few defined avenues of approach that stretched from Meiktila-Mandalay south to Rangoon. These routes were well over three hundred miles in length and certain to be filled with obstacles and prepared for ambushes. Finally, Slim would have the weather to contend with. With it already early April, there were only five to six weeks remaining until the start of the monsoon season. If the Allies could not seize Rangoon before the monsoon season it was conceivable the campaign could extend into the later months of 1945. If this did occur it could afford the Japanese time to reinforce Southern Burma from Siam. It was truly, as Slim himself called it, “the race to Rangoon.”¹⁴⁴

Slim and the 14 Army would not be the only allied participant in the race. As discussed earlier, the original plan for the reconquest of Burma, outlined on 23 July 1944, called for an amphibious assault on Rangoon called Dracula. Dracula was part of a two-pronged attack, along with Operation Capital to retake Burma.

Since that time, Allied leadership had vacillated on the merits and feasibility of Dracula. On 6 February 1945, the Combined Chiefs of Staff ordered the postponement of Dracula until the end of 1945. The factors for this were resource availability and optimism that the 14 Army could make an overland seizure of Rangoon before the monsoon. However, on 26 March 1945, Leese recommended that the Chiefs of Staff relook their decision on Dracula. Leese was concerned that the 14 Army would not reach Rangoon before the monsoon hit. After more discussion and analysis, Mountbatten issued a directive on 17 April 1945 ordering his forces “to carry out an amphibious and airborne operation with the object of the early capture of Rangoon, should this not have been previously achieved by the 14 Army from the north.”¹⁴⁵

There was little time to prepare for this operation. Mountbatten conceded this fact when he stated, “It was fully realized that the amphibious operation would be a difficult one, particularly since there was little time left for planning and mounting the assault.”¹⁴⁶ The one advantage Mountbatten had in attempting the assault was the key terrain the 15 Corps had seized during its attack down the Arakan Peninsula. By early April 1945, the 15 Corps had seized the valuable Akyab and Ramtree Islands and much of the terrain within the peninsula. This was critical for the following reasons: 1) the 15 Corps had either destroyed or fixed numerous Japanese units that could not be used to defend Rangoon. 2) The relative closeness of Akyab and Ramtree to Rangoon facilitated

operations into Rangoon. 3) Akyab and Ramtree contained excellent airfields and some port facilities that could be utilized for amphibious and airborne assaults. Each of these factors would influence the outcome of Dracula, which is discussed later in the chapter.

Actually Slim's planning for Rangoon began in July 1944, with detailed planning commencing in November when his forces approached the Chindwin River. On 19 December 1944, Slim issued detailed orders to his corps commanders regarding the seizure of Rangoon. Consequently, when Slim was formally tasked by A.L.F.S.E.A on 27 February 1945 to seize Rangoon before the monsoon, he already had a basic plan. It would go through some modifications in the upcoming weeks based on the tactical situation, but Slim and his staff had a base plan ready to execute.

As the operations in Meiktila and Mandalay were winding down, Slim put the finishing touches on his plan to seize Rangoon. The following passage from his memoirs gives a summary of his tactical problem,

With luck we should have some forty days to reach--and take--Rangoon. From Meiktila, by the railway route, Rangoon is three hundred and twenty miles; from Chauk, via the Irrawaddy Valley, three hundred and seventy. We should have to move at an average of eight or ten miles a day. That, against opposition and demolitions, was fast. There would be no time to stage elaborate attacks; positions that could not be taken by quick assault would have to be by-passed. Even when they were taken, there could be no pause for thorough mopping-up, nor could we wait to deal with the very large bodies of Japanese already driven into the hills on the flanks of both routes.¹⁴⁷

Based on his estimate and the location of his forces, Slim finalized his plan. The 4 Corps, located around Meiktila, would attack using the railway route or the east axis. This route ran for approximately 320 miles. Its intermediate objectives were Pyinmana, Toungoo, and Pego and its task organization included the 5, 17, and 19 Divisions and the 255 Tank Brigade. This would be the initial main effort for the operation, assigned the

task of seizing Rangoon. The 33 Corps would attack via the Irrawaddy Valley or the west axis. This route ran for 370 miles. Their intermediate objectives were the oilfields near Yenangyaung, Allanmyo, and Prome and its task organization included the 7 and 20 Divisions and the 265 Tank Brigade. It, too, was given the primary task to seize Rangoon, but as a shaping effort, it would protect the western flank of 4 Corps from counterattacks and destroy any Japanese forces withdrawing from the Arakan Peninsula. Slim simply gave his units a route, with a task to seize Rangoon as soon as possible. His corps commanders would now determine the how.

Besides the looming weather issues, Slim had other concerns in his race to Rangoon. First, were the logistical considerations of the operation. Slim had to supply his forces over these long routes. Since he already had long overland routes, he would continue to rely on air transport and utilize the river networks. In all cases, he would have difficulty securing all supply convoys because of the large numbers of Japanese throughout the area of operations. Second, was the condition of his vehicles and tanks. They had already been pushed hard and now had to face over a 300-mile maneuver over difficult terrain. Third, was the condition of his Soldiers. They, just like their vehicles, were essentially worn out. Slim would need his leaders at all levels to ensure the Soldiers remained focused and morale was kept as high as possible.

Before issuing the order to begin the attack, Slim had much anxiety. However, he held much optimism as well. These following comments highlight both these emotions.

He states:

It was very plain to me--and if it had not been, plenty of people were willing to enlighten me--that this dash for Rangoon by a mechanized force, confined to one road, thrusting against time through superior numbers, was a most hazardous and

possibly rather un-British operation. I knew the risks and the penalties of failure but, as I checked over the final plans, I was ready to accept them. Whatever the risks, we were winning. We had kicked over the ant-hill; the ants were running about in confusion. Now was the time to stamp on them. My soldiers were out for Rangoon, and anyone who was with them and had seen them fight could not doubt that they would get there. Once more the exhilaration running through the army was a tangible thing that could be seen and felt. I shared it.¹⁴⁸

Slim gave the order to attack on 8 April 1945 to his forces (see figure 15). On the east, his main effort, the 4 Corps immediately ran into stiff resistance near Pyawbwe on 10 April 1945. It took the 4 Corps some nine days to fight through the area and this greatly disrupted any timelines developed for the operation. Based on the past, it is certain Slim was feeling some pressure from his higher headquarters to speed up his maneuver. However, once the 4 Corps broke out of Pyawbwe, the Japanese resistance dramatically lessened.

By 21 April 1945, the 4 Corps had reached Pyinmana and gathered momentum. The primary reason for this success was the maneuver concept devised by the commander, Lieutenant-General Frank Messervy and his staff. In this concept, Messervy would bound his two divisions, the 5 and 17, down the attack axis. One division would set on key terrain and overwatch the movement of the other division. Units would move wide to flank Japanese formations and then establish roadblocks behind enemy positions. This maneuver was reminiscent of the Japanese tactics used during their days of success in the campaign. Stronger Japanese formations were by-passed and then destroyed by follow-on units.¹⁴⁹

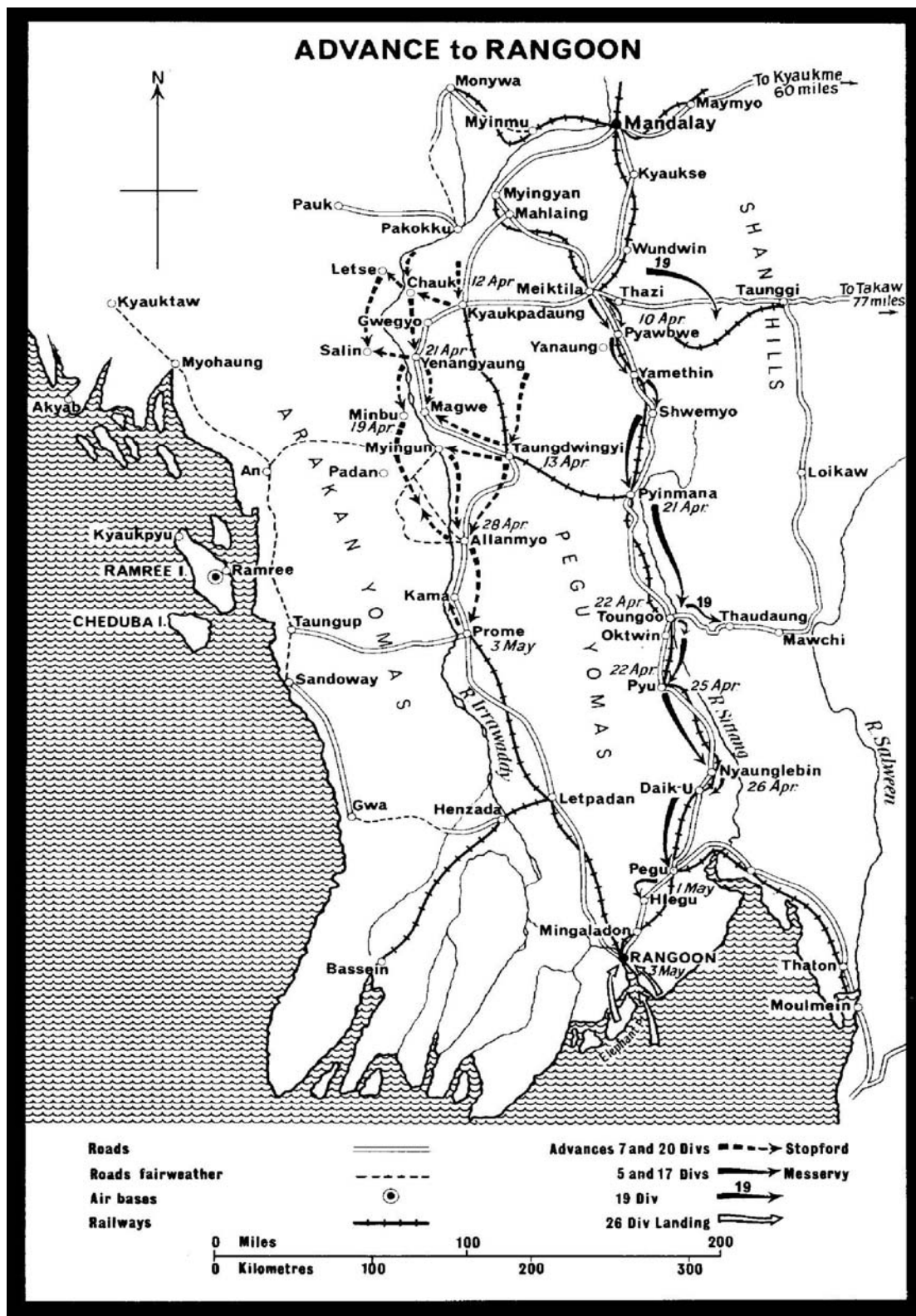


Figure 15. Advance to Rangoon
Source: Michael Calvert, *Slim* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 150.

The 4 Corps continued to press the attack south and on 22 April 1945 seized the critical airfields located at Toungoo. The momentum did not stop as the corps moved through Pyu on 25 April, Nyaunglebin on 26 April and Pegu on 1 May. The 4 Corps was now just fifty miles from Rangoon and poised to seize the city.

While the 4 Corps maneuvered south via the railway route the 33 Corps utilized the Irrawaddy Valley for maneuver. As mentioned earlier, the 33 Corps was fifty miles further away from Rangoon than its sister corps and the route promised to be slower and more enemy infested. The 33 Corps moved from its positions around Mandalay on 8 April. By 18 April 1945, it had maneuvered through Chauk and on 21 April seized Yenangyaung. It became obvious at this time that the progress by the 4 Corps on the east was much quicker than that of 33 Corps. Consequently, the race to Rangoon would have to be won by 4 Corps and 33 Corps would ensure its western flank was protected. As the 33 Corps continued to protect the 4 Corps flank, it reached Allammye on 28 April 1945 and began moving to the key road network located at Prome.

The first of May 1945 was critical in two ways in the seizure of Rangoon. First, much to the dismay of Slim and the British leadership, the monsoon torrential rains began. This was approximately two weeks earlier than anticipated and its coming had huge ramifications for Slim. Second, in the morning hours of 1 May 1945, the British began attacking key Japanese defensive areas in Rangoon with air assets. Following the air attacks, the first Soldiers from Operation Dracula arrived in Rangoon. These Soldiers were part of the 50 Indian Parachute Brigade and were air dropped to seize key facilities in order to set favorable conditions for amphibious assault. With the arrival of the Soldiers in Rangoon, the pressure on Slim to get at least one of corps into Rangoon eased.

Operation Dracula proved both memorable and uneventful. The most memorable event of the operation occurred shortly after the airborne assault. Early on the afternoon of 1 May 1945, British aircraft flew over an area which intelligence believed held Allied prisoners of war. When the planes flew over, they noticed a roof where the words “Japs Gone” were painted in large letters. When the aircraft did not take any action, the prisoners living in the building, believed the pilots thought the words were part of a ruse. Consequently, the prisoners went back on the roof and painted the words “Extract Digit” on the roof. This was their idea to authenticate the earlier message in a British slang saying that they felt the pilots would know could not be part of any Japanese deception plan.¹⁵⁰

The next day, a pilot flying around the area noticed there was no enemy activity in the area. The pilot decided to land in a nearby airfield and promptly crashed his airplane. The pilot walked over to the building where the prisoners were held and was told personally that the Japanese had left Rangoon days earlier. The pilot commandeered a sampan and sailed it down a river to meet the initial boats of the British amphibious force. He told the commanders that the Japanese had left Rangoon. With this knowledge, British leadership stopped bombing Rangoon and on 3 May 1945 the leading units of the amphibious force made an uneventful, unopposed landing on Rangoon. It was soon confirmed that the Japanese had left the city days earlier.

As the events of Operation Dracula unfolded, the 14 Army continued their maneuver south, but things changed dramatically on 1 May 1945 when the rains started to fall. Slim summarizes the actions in the 4 Corps area of operations, “On the afternoon of the 1st May, a great misfortune befell the 4 Corps. Pegu was in our hands and the

advance resumed, when a torrential storm burst over the whole area, followed throughout the night by continuous heavy rain. The monsoon was on us--a fortnight before its time! By morning much of the country was waterlogged, airstrips going out of action, and the Pegu River rising ominously.”¹⁵¹

For the remainder of that day and through 2 and 3 May 1945, the 4 Corps continued to slowly trudge on to Rangoon (see figure 16). Finally, on the evening of 3 May 1945 they received word that 15 Corps had seized Rangoon. At that time, they were moving towards Hlegu, still miles away from Rangoon. There must have been some disappointment that they were not the liberators of the city, but the feelings of pride and accomplishment as a whole overrode these. Days later, on 6 May 1945, the leading elements of 4 Corps linked-up with elements from the 15 Corps at Hlegu.

While the 4 Corps forward progress was to Hlegu, the 33 Corps continued to protect their flank. By 3 May 1945, it reached the key terrain of Prome when they received word that Rangoon was seized. They continued to slowly move down the Irrawaddy valley and on 6 May 1945 their forward units arrived at Paungde. It was at this point, that the 33 Corps focused on destroying any enemy formations withdrawing out of the Arakan peninsula.

It could be said that Slim’s overland march to Rangoon was not necessary since it was the forces of Operation Dracula that succeeded in seizing Rangoon. However, the criticality of the 14 Army actions to the overall success of the operation was not lost on Mountbatten. He stated, “Although the Fourteenth Army had lost the “race for Rangoon,” it was their drive which had really won the battle; for if their rapid advance had not

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Figure 16. Summary of the Reconquest
Source: Robert Lyman, *Slim: Master of War, Burma 1942-1945* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2004 Ltd.), 307.

forced Lieut-General Kimura to evacuate the port, Dracula--which beat the monsoon by only a few hours--would have met with severe opposition.”¹⁵²

On 14 May 1945, a victory parade was held in the streets of Rangoon. However, for the next three months, the Allied forces continued to pursue the withdrawing Japanese forces. Fighting continued until the two atomic bombs fell on Japan and forced the Japanese to surrender. With the Japanese official surrender on 14 August 1945, the CBI Campaign was officially over after forty-four months and the reconquest of Burma was complete.

Slim's tenure as 14 Army Commander concluded in mid-June when another massive reorganization took place within the British leadership. He would succeed Leese as the A.L.F.S.E.A. Commander and begin preparing for future operations in Malaya. However, before he assumed command, he took a month's leave in England. When he was flying back to Southeast Asia from leave, he received word that the Japanese had surrendered unconditionally.

For Slim, his campaign was now over as well, but redemption was now his. One of the more fitting tributes Slim received for his performance during the Burma Campaign was made by historian Duncan Anderson. Anderson states, “Although it would be wrong to say that nobody could have accomplished what Slim did in Burma, it would be true to say that nobody could have done it better. Any judgement of his feats should be based on what he did with what he had--or rather with what he had not. The measure of his greatness as a commander lies in the fact that he never had enough to do what he had to do.”¹⁵³

¹Geoffrey Evans, *Slim as Military Commander* (London: D. Van Nostrand, Inc., 1969), 99.

²Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 164.

³Evans, 104.

⁴Earl Mountbatten, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Commander, South-East Asia, 1943-1945* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1951), 3.

⁵*Ibid.*, 10.

⁶Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standardbearer* (Hertfordshire, England: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 132.

⁷Evans, 105.

⁸Woodburn S. Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, vol. 3 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1959), 47.

⁹Lewin, 140.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Slim, 207.

¹²Lewin, 140.

¹³Slim, 207.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 168-169.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 173.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Robert Lyman, *Slim: Master of War, 1942-1945* (London: Constable and Robinson, Ltd., 2004), 141.

²²Slim, 172.

²³Lyman, 141.

²⁴Slim, 172.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 177.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Michael Hickey, *The Unforgettable Army: Slim's XIVth Army in Burma* (Kent, England: Spellmount, Ltd., 1992), 91.

²⁸Slim, 178.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.*, 179.

³²*Ibid.*, 180.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 180-181.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹*Ibid.*, 182-183.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 184.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 186.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 183-187.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 188-194.

- ⁴⁴Ibid., 186.
- ⁴⁵Evans, 118.
- ⁴⁶Kirby, 67.
- ⁴⁷Mountbatten, 30.
- ⁴⁸Evans, 135.
- ⁴⁹Kirby, 73.
- ⁵⁰Raymond A. Callahan, *Burma, 1942-1945: The Politics and Strategy of the Second World War* (London: Davis Publishing, 1978), 132.
- ⁵¹Slim, 238.
- ⁵²Lewin 176.
- ⁵³Kirby, 151.
- ⁵⁴Evans, 225.
- ⁵⁵Michael Calvert, *Slim* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 81.
- ⁵⁶David Rooney, *Burma Victory: Imphal, Kohima, and the Chindit Issue, March 1944 to May 1945* (London: Arms, 1992), 26.
- ⁵⁷Evans, 141.
- ⁵⁸Mountbatten, 44.
- ⁵⁹Slim, 245.
- ⁶⁰Ibid., 246-247.
- ⁶¹Donovan Webster, *The Burma Road: The Epic Story of the China-Burma-India Theater in World War II* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 81.
- ⁶²Calvert, 55.
- ⁶³Slim, 162.
- ⁶⁴Calvert, 55.
- ⁶⁵Slim, 162.
- ⁶⁶Hickey, 86.

- ⁶⁷Webster, 106.
- ⁶⁸Hickey, 89.
- ⁶⁹Duncan Anderson, “Slim” in John Keegan, *Churchill’s General’s* (New York: Grove, Weidenfeld, 1991), 315.
- ⁷⁰Callahan, 138.
- ⁷¹Lewin, 152.
- ⁷²Slim, 219.
- ⁷³Lewin, 153.
- ⁷⁴This left Wingate with two brigades still in reserve.
- ⁷⁵Hickey, 115.
- ⁷⁶Rooney, 123.
- ⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 124.
- ⁷⁸Hickey, 116.
- ⁷⁹Kirby, 181.
- ⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 182.
- ⁸¹Calvert, 87.
- ⁸²Slim, 291.
- ⁸³Evans, 145.
- ⁸⁴Calvert, 87.
- ⁸⁵Slim, 292.
- ⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 294.
- ⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 296.
- ⁸⁸*Ibid.*
- ⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 294.
- ⁹⁰Calvert, 96.

- ⁹¹Hickey, 153.
- ⁹²Slim, 269-270.
- ⁹³Hickey, 120.
- ⁹⁴Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War, 1941-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 349.
- ⁹⁵Slim, 269.
- ⁹⁶Allen, 348.
- ⁹⁷Slim, 310.
- ⁹⁸Webster, 257.
- ⁹⁹Slim, 311.
- ¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 315.
- ¹⁰¹Rooney, 102.
- ¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 99.
- ¹⁰³Allen, 289.
- ¹⁰⁴Kirby, 526.
- ¹⁰⁵Rooney, 105.
- ¹⁰⁶Slim, 323.
- ¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 324.
- ¹⁰⁸Evans, 107.
- ¹⁰⁹Webster, 256.
- ¹¹⁰Slim, 332.
- ¹¹¹Rooney, 136.
- ¹¹²Mountbatten, 63.
- ¹¹³Slim, 280.
- ¹¹⁴Evans, 173.

- ¹¹⁵Slim, 333.
- ¹¹⁶Ibid., 346.
- ¹¹⁷Hickey, 299.
- ¹¹⁸Allen, 638.
- ¹¹⁹Callahan, 137.
- ¹²⁰Slim, 367.
- ¹²¹Ibid., 367-368.
- ¹²²Mountbatten, 75.
- ¹²³Ibid.
- ¹²⁴Mountbatten, 83.
- ¹²⁵Slim, 384-385.
- ¹²⁶Ibid., 378.
- ¹²⁷Ibid., 379.
- ¹²⁸Ibid., 390.
- ¹²⁹Mountbatten, 102.
- ¹³⁰Lewin, 209.
- ¹³¹Callahan, 154.
- ¹³²Slim, 393.
- ¹³³Lewin, 211-212.
- ¹³⁴Mountbatten, 103.
- ¹³⁵Slim, 395.
- ¹³⁶Evans, 193.
- ¹³⁷Mountbatten, 151.
- ¹³⁸Slim, 452.

- ¹³⁹Ibid., 409.
- ¹⁴⁰Woodburn S. Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, vol. 4 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1959), 273.
- ¹⁴¹Mountbatten, 139.
- ¹⁴²E. K. G. Sixsmith, *British Generalship in the Twentieth Century* (London: Arms and Armour, 1970), 290.
- ¹⁴³Evans, 209.
- ¹⁴⁴Slim, 479.
- ¹⁴⁵Mountbatten, 146.
- ¹⁴⁶Ibid.
- ¹⁴⁷ Slim, 480.
- ¹⁴⁸Ibid., 485.
- ¹⁴⁹Evans, 207.
- ¹⁵⁰Hickey, 225.
- ¹⁵¹Slim, 505.
- ¹⁵²Mountbatten, 157.
- ¹⁵³ Geoffrey Evans, "Field Marshal The Viscount Slim" in Michael Carver, *The War Lords: Military Commanders of the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 386.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS: SLIM'S ROLE IN THE RECONQUEST OF BURMA

The preceding chapter highlighted the integral part Slim played in the Allies' reconquest of Burma. Certainly, other questions quickly come to mind when studying the Burma Campaign and Slim's contribution to its success. Principally, could the Allies have defeated the Japanese without Slim? This question makes for great debate. However this question is beyond the scope of this study.

Consequently, this thesis focuses on the specific contributions Slim made as the 14 Army Commander in the reconquest of Burma. In analyzing these contributions, it is important to take a holistic approach and look at these contributions in a wide array of areas. In the past, most, if not all studies of Slim focused on Slim's contributions in the area of improving morale. Truly, this was critical and perhaps his greatest contribution. However, to limit the study just to the area of morale would do an extreme disservice to the total performance of Slim as the 14 Army Commander.

In order to determine his specific contributions, a set of established categories is needed. These categories should provide clarity and organization. After extensive research, the source for these categories was found in the United States Army field manual on leadership, FM 22-100. This manual provided the desired structure for the analysis on Slim's role in the reconquest of Burma.

FM 22-100 was published in August 1999 for an audience of active component, Army National Guard, Army Reserve, and Department of the Army (DA) Civilians. It had a threefold purpose for its audience: first, to provide leadership doctrine for meeting mission requirements under all conditions; second, to establish a unified leadership

theory for all leaders: military and civilian, active and reserve, officer and enlisted; and third, to provide a comprehensive and adaptable leadership resource for the Army of the twenty-first century.¹

The first step in analyzing Slim's contributions is determining the level of leadership he exhibited in the reconquest of Burma. In FM 22-100, there are three defined levels of leadership. The first and lowest level of leadership is direct. Direct level leadership is face to face, first-line leadership. It takes place in those organizations where subordinates are used to seeing their leaders all the time: teams and squads, sections and platoons, companies, batteries, and troops-even squadrons and battalions. A leader operating at the direct level has a span of influence from a handful to several hundred people.²

The second and middle level of leadership is organizational. Organizational level leaders influence several hundred to several thousand people. They do this indirectly, generally through more levels of subordinates than do direct leaders. These leaders have staffs to help them manage their organizations' resources. They establish policies and the organizational climate that support their subordinate leaders. Organizational level leaders at this level must deal with more complexity, more people, greater uncertainty, and a greater number of unintended consequences than direct leaders.³

The final and highest level of leadership is strategic. Strategic level leaders are responsible for large organizations and influence several thousand to hundreds of thousands of people. These leaders establish force structure, allocate resources, communicate strategic vision, and prepare their commands and the Army as a whole for their future roles. Strategic level leaders, like direct and organizational level leaders,

process information quickly, assess alternatives based on incomplete data, make decisions, and generate support. However, strategic level leaders' decisions affect more people, commit more resources, and have wider-ranging consequences in both space and time than do decisions of organizational and direct leaders.⁴

The above definitions are now utilized in determining the level of leadership Slim exhibited as the 14 Army Commander. Although Slim operated at times as a direct level leader, it was at this level that Slim spent his least amount time. Although Slim was very comfortable with face-to-face interaction with his subordinates, he influenced far too many Soldiers to be defined as a direct leader. This coupled with the tremendous complexity and uncertainty in his environment require moving to the organizational and strategic level categories to determine Slim's predominant leadership level during the Burma Campaign.

In looking at each of these levels, a case could be made for either one as the level Slim exhibited primarily as the 14 Army Commander. The most objective factor in this comparison is the number of people influenced by level. According to FM 22-100, an organizational level leader's realm of influence is from several hundred to several thousand people, while a strategic level leader influences several thousand to several hundred thousand. During Slim's command of the 14 Army, he had over 500,000 Soldiers in his organization.⁵ Based solely on numbers, Slim is defined primarily as a strategic level leader.

Despite this factor, the rationale to define Slim as principally an organizational level leader is more compelling for the following reasons. First, Slim's leadership philosophy of face-to-face interaction and his constant practice of visiting Soldiers as

much as possible, are more characteristic of an organizational leader than a strategic leader. Second, because of the organizational structure Slim commanded in, he did not make decisions in terms of force structure and allocation of resources at the strategic level. These decisions were made by the 11 Army (later named A.L.F.S.E.A.), and S.E.A.C. Thus, Giffard and Mountbatten made almost all the strategic decisions within the theater regarding force structure and allocation of resources. Third, much in the same vein, Giffard and Mountbatten made the vast majority of the strategic decisions on the battlefield, not Slim. This was facilitated by the closeness of the 11 Army (A.L.F.S.E.A.) and S.E.A.C. headquarters in India. There was not a significant distance between Slim and his higher headquarters, which assisted in this decision-making process. Fourth, the development of the 11 Army (A.L.F.S.E.A.) created the environment in which the commander of that organization (Giffard and later Leese) exhibited the actions of a strategic level leader. Consequently, Slim was allowed to operate primarily in the organizational level where he was much more comfortable and effective.

In order to verify or nullify this conclusion, this analysis was discussed with faculty members of the Command and General Staff College's Leadership Department.⁶ Their consensus was that the analysis was sound and that Slim acted principally as an organizational level leader while serving as the 14 Army Commander during the reconquest of Burma. They did add, however, that there were many instances during Slim's command tenure in which he did act as a strategic level leader. This specifically occurred in his dealings with the allies within the CBI Theater. In particular, were his negotiations with Stilwell regarding resource issues and the use of the Chinese forces. However, in conclusion, they believed that the combination of the CBI command

structure, British leadership personalities in the theater, and Slim's leadership style in effect defined him as primarily an organizational level leader.

After defining Slim as an organizational level leader, FM 22-100 can now be used to describe the specific role in which he assisted in the reconquest of Burma. FM 22-100 outlines key actions an organizational level leader must do or should exhibit in order to lead his unit. Within leader actions, FM 22-100 places the actions into three broad categories. These are influencing, operating, and improving actions. Within each of these broad categories, there is further delineation with more precise actions.

The remainder of this chapter analyzes Slim's role by utilizing these precise actions. In order to ensure better clarity for the reader, the thesis will organize the rest of the chapter in the following way. First, it will provide a definition of each of the three broad categories of organizational leadership actions. Second, after defining the broad category, the thesis defines the precise actions within the broad category and lists examples in which Slim exhibited this action. These examples will illustrate the impact Slim had as the 14 Army Commander in the reconquest of Burma.

Influencing Actions

The first broad category of organizational level leadership actions is influencing actions. FM 22-100 defines influencing actions as making decisions, communicating those decisions, and motivating people.⁷ Normally, influencing actions at the organizational level of leadership are more indirect than face to face. Slim was an anomaly in that his use of face-to-face leadership was much more extensive than leaders at the organizational and strategic levels traditionally utilize.

Influencing Actions--Communicating

The first way an organizational level leader can successfully influence his organization is through communicating. FM 22-100 defines communicating as displaying good oral, written, and listening skills for individuals and groups.⁸ As described in chapter 4 of this thesis, Slim relied heavily on his communication skills as the 14 Army Commander. In fact, his effective communications were critical in the reconquest of Burma in three particular areas.

First, and perhaps most importantly, was Slim's ability to communicate one overriding theme to his Soldiers. This theme was that his forces had one single task and that was the complete destruction of the Japanese Army. Slim communicated this to his Soldiers during the initial days of his command. During these early days, it proved to have a significant positive impact on morale and sparked enthusiasm for training. As the campaign continued, Slim still utilized the theme to motivate Soldiers and units when fatigue had set in.

Second, Slim's ability to effectively communicate with his higher headquarters was critical during the reconquest. Throughout his command, he had the ability to successfully package his requests for additional resources to Mountbatten and Giffard. In particular, his request for added resources during the Kohima/Imphal battles was critical to success. Without these added resources, the Allies may not have been able to fight the attrition battle, which was crucial in setting the conditions for the subsequent attack into Burma.

Finally, Slim's ability to communicate with Stilwell and Wingate was important in the overall conduct of the campaign. In terms of Stilwell, Slim was one of the few

British leaders that Stilwell had any respect for. Without this respect, it is conceivable that Stilwell's operations in the north would not have had any tie-in to the rest of the Allied operation. Stilwell was a renegade and did more or less what he wanted to do. However, Slim was able to gently persuade Stilwell to conduct some operations, such as fixing Japanese forces in China which could have been used in central Burma. These forces may have influenced the 14 Army offensive.

In respect to Wingate, Slim's communication skills effectively prevented him from totally influencing the planning of the Allies. Slim used a combination of appeasing Wingate and not giving in to his demands. These actions resulted in Wingate not going to Churchill and ask for critical resources. It is indeed possible that if Wingate had gone to Churchill in the later months of 1943, the war would have been fought entirely differently. As discussed earlier, Wingate envisioned a war where conventional forces would support unconventional forces. It is possible that if the British decided to fight this type of war, the reconquest of Burma may not have taken place.

Influencing Actions--Decision Making

The second way an organizational level leader can successfully influence his organization is through decision-making. FM 22-100 defines decision making as selecting the line of action intended to be followed as the one most favorable to the successful accomplishment of the mission. This involves using sound judgment, logical reasoning logically, and wise management of resources.⁹ In the reconquest of Burma, Slim made numerous key decisions. However, there were five decisions that stood out in the reconquest of Burma.

The first decision was to send his reserve forces in February 1944 to reinforce the efforts of the 15 Corps against the Japanese Ha-Go offensive. Perhaps, these forces were not necessary to eventually repel the Japanese offensive. However, their presence decided the issue much quicker than if the 15 Corps would have been left to its own devices. This had a positive effect in two areas. First, there was a savings in the amount of total resources used to repel the Japanese attack. These resources were utilized later in the Kohima-Imphal battles. Second, the victory in Arakan had a huge positive effect on morale throughout the 14 Army. The ability to repel the attack earlier translated in improving morale that much quicker within the organization.

The second key decision Slim made was his choice to counter the Japanese U-Go offensive in terrain of his own choosing. Slim's decision to fight the Japanese in the favorable terrain of the Imphal plain played to his strengths of mechanized maneuver and combat aircraft firepower. If Slim would have fought the Japanese further east or conducted a spoiling attack, these strengths would not have been fully exploited. Consequently, the attrition battle he so desired may not have taken place and the conditions not set to conduct the offensive into Burma.

Slim's third key decision was to continue to fight the Japanese during the monsoon season of 1944. By continuing to press the fight, Slim was able to maintain contact with his enemy and keep the initiative. If Slim conducted a pause as was the traditional practice during the monsoon season, the duration of the campaign would have significantly lengthened. It would have allowed the Japanese added time to build their defenses in Burma and forced the 14 Army to expend additional time and resources to regain contact with the Japanese forces.

The fourth key decision made by Slim was perhaps the most influential in the reconquest of Burma. This decision was to change his offensive plan in midstream, when determining the enemy would not defend the Shwebo plain as originally thought. Slim, with his end state of destroying the Japanese Army always at the forefront, made the decision to fight the enemy and not his original plan. His decision to attack enemy forces in both Mandalay and Meiktila proved to be decisive in the reconquest of Burma. Slim's use of deception in Operation Extended Capital completely befuddled the Japanese and forced them to react to the Allies during the rest of the campaign.

The final key decision Slim made was on 9 March 1945, when he committed his reserve (the 5 Indian Division) to augment the 4 Corps in Meiktila. At that time, the Japanese had sent all available combat power to Meiktila to retake the town. Slim knew that if he did not repel the counterattack and begin moving south to Rangoon, the future monsoon rains would make movement near impossible. The commitment of the reserve gave Slim the additional combat power needed to stop the Japanese counterattack and begin the race to Rangoon.

Influencing Actions--Motivating

The third, and final way an organizational leader can successfully influence his organization is through motivating. FM 22-100 defines motivating as inspiring and guiding others toward mission accomplishment.¹⁰ An organizational level leader must know the intricacies of the job, trust his people, develop trust among them, and support his subordinates.¹¹

During the reconquest of Burma, Slim was literally there every step of the way. As stated earlier, Slim spent a significant part of his time visiting Soldiers. In the

beginning months of his command, Slim motivated Soldiers by first focusing on their personal needs and then, always ending by instilling in them that they had the capacity to destroy their opponent. In terms of guiding others, Slim gave clear intent and guidance to his subordinates to focus their efforts in the areas of health, supply, and morale. After giving them this intent and guidance, he allowed them to determine how they would accomplish their tasks. This trust he developed between himself and his staff and subordinate leaders was critical during the offensive.

During combat operations, Slim possessed the knack, as do many great commanders, of being at the right place at the right time. In many individual accounts of the reconquest of Burma, Soldiers and leaders at all levels remarked that Slim was always there at the critical moment. The presence of the Army commander had to inspire any Soldier to push forward, when he may have felt he could not push any farther. As Michael Calvert (a division commander under Slim) states, “In an area where the ratio of morale to the physical was more like 6 to 1 than the 3 to 1 ratio of Clausewitz’s famous dictum, it was vital for troops to have confidence in their general. Slim did more than that. He inspired the loyalty and affection in soldiers of all races, a loyalty which welded the ‘Forgotten Army’ together.”¹²

Operating Actions

The second broad category of organizational level leadership actions are operating actions. FM 22-100 defines operating actions as the things you do to accomplish your organization’s immediate mission.¹³ These operating actions are achieved by planning and preparing, executing, and assessing.

Operating Actions--Planning and Preparing

The first way an organizational level leader conducts operating actions within his unit is through planning and preparing. This involves developing detailed, executable plans that are feasible, acceptable and suitable; arranging unit support for the exercise or operation; and conducting rehearsals.¹⁴

Most studies of the Burma Campaign and on Slim himself focus on his motivational skills and his ability to relate to Soldiers at all levels. Consequently, his abilities in preparing the 14 Army for combat and his planning skills may not receive the attention they deserve. Truly, Slim's role in preparing his forces for combat and his planning during the campaign were instrumental in the reconquest of Burma.

In the area of preparation, as stated earlier, Slim focused on the health, supply and morale of his unit from the initial days of his command. In particular, Slim believed that the areas of supply and transport would decide his unit's success throughout the rest of the campaign. With that in mind, Slim spent a great deal of personal time and energy in preparing his unit logistically. Included in this preparation was procuring badly needed equipment, weapons and ammunition, although his theater was last in priority; requesting all available aircraft for use in aerial resupply of his unit; and building roads and airfields for use in transporting supplies and equipment.

This logistical preparation grew in significance as the campaign continued. This was because the 14 Army was able to logistically support its units, while after the first two weeks of the U-Go offensive, the Japanese did not have any logistical plan. As addressed earlier, the Japanese planned to utilize the British assets once they found early

success. This did not materialize and consequently, Slim's preparation reaped large dividends for the 14 Army.

The most significant aspect in the area of planning was Slim's ability to instill flexibility in his plans. This was critical in three particular instances during the reconquest of Burma. The first instance was during the initial days of the Japanese Ha-Go Offensive in the Arakan Peninsula. In an unfortunate pattern for Slim, his forces were once again tactically surprised by the Japanese attack. However, in the planning for operations, Slim had his units plan for the "administrative box" defense. This type of defense (as described in Chapter 4) and his use of reserve forces (as outlined earlier) allowed his forces to repel the Japanese attack and subsequently, achieve a vital victory.

The second instance of flexibility was Slim's Operation Extended Capital plan. The most impressive aspects of the plan was Slim's ability to construct this plan while in the midst of an opposed river crossing and to devise a deception effort, which totally fooled the Japanese. As stated earlier in chapter 4, the plan was extremely bold and daring. If the Japanese had seen through the deception effort it is possible they could have attacked the flank of 4 Corps during their movement and then moved to Rangoon to tighten their grip on the port. This would have surely extended the campaign another year. However, the deception worked and the eventual outcome set the conditions to seize Rangoon.

The last instance of flexibility was Slim's plan for the race to Rangoon. Knowing that time was of the essence, he essentially gave both his corps the same mission. He asked each to get to Rangoon as soon as possible. He believed that if he could get at least one corps in Rangoon before the May monsoon rains, he would achieve success.

Although, the amphibious assault beat Slim's forces to Rangoon, the movement of both corps to Rangoon forced the Japanese to leave the port and withdraw.

Operating Actions--Executing

The second way an organizational level leader conducts operating actions within his unit is through executing. This involves meeting mission standards, taking care of people, and efficiently managing resources.¹⁵ In combat, organizational level leaders integrate and synchronize all available elements of the combined arms team, empower subordinates, and assign tasks to accomplish the mission. They must directly and indirectly energize their units--commanders and Soldiers--to push through confusion and hardship to victory.¹⁶

In terms of executing, Slim made two important decisions in the areas of synchronizing combat power and managing resources. The first involved the selection of the Imphal plain to counter the Japanese U-Go offensive. In order to inflict the most casualties as possible upon the Japanese, Slim needed terrain that would support his strengths in armor, combat aircraft, and registered artillery. The vast jungle terrain of India and Burma did not support these strengths. However, the Imphal plain did afford some opportunities to synchronize these assets and take a combined arms approach to fighting. Slim took advantage of this terrain and was able to fight the attrition battle he desired.

The second decision involved the use of managing resources. During the first week of February 1945, Slim called for a short operational pause for his Army. This was during the period when both his corps were maneuvering into positions to begin their attacks into Mandalay and Meiktila. This pause enabled the 14 Army to establish and

develop airheads for use in aerial resupply and to bring forward logistics by ground transport. The operational pause was not only instrumental in the success of Extended Capital, but the development of the airheads was critical in supplying the forces in the race to Rangoon. Slim was correct when he stated in the early days of his command how critical logistics would be in the reconquest of Burma.

Operating Actions--Assessing

The third, and final way an organizational level leader conducts operating actions within his unit is through assessing. This involves evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of any system or plan in terms of its purpose and mission.¹⁷ An organizational level leader conducts assessments to determine any organizational weaknesses and to preempt any potential problems that could arise in future operations.

This thesis has made numerous references to Slim's ability to make assessments of his Soldiers and his units. As discussed earlier, Slim immediately made assessments of the 14 Army as soon as he assumed command. He felt that the areas of supply, health, and morale were weaknesses within the organization. His belief was that if these areas remained weaknesses, the organization would never achieve any of its future goals and objectives. What was even more critical about these assessments was the fact they would have to be remedied shortly, since significant combat operations loomed on the horizon.

From all accounts, it appears that Slim's assessments were extremely accurate and enabled him and his leaders to focus in the right areas to improve the organization. If Slim would have focused his efforts initially in other areas, there is potential that the above areas would not have been addressed due to time constraints. Additionally, with his theater at the low end of resourcing, he had to make the right choices in terms of

requesting resources. He was not going to get everything he asked for. Making these right choices starts with an assessment of a unit's current status and where it needs to go.

Based on the vast improvement of 14 Army in the areas of supply, health and morale and their impact on the reconquest of Burma, it appears Slim made the right choices.

Improving Actions

The third broad category of organizational leadership actions is improving actions. FM 22-100 defines improving actions as the things we do to increase the organization's capability to accomplish current or future missions.¹⁸ Organizational level leaders focus their units' efforts on short- and long-term goals. Organizational level leaders improve their units by developing, building, and setting the conditions for the unit to learn.

Improving Actions - Developing

The first way an organizational level leader can improve his unit is by developing. This involves investing adequate time and effort to develop individual subordinates as leaders, including mentoring.¹⁹ An organizational level leader keeps a focus on where the organization needs to go and what all leaders must be capable of accomplishing. Organizational level leaders continually develop themselves and mentor their subordinate leaders. The organizational level leader will assess his organization to determine organization-specific developmental needs.²⁰

One of the most impressive organizational level skills Slim possessed was his ability to develop leaders at all levels. Slim had a tremendous impact on his higher-level subordinate leaders (division and corps commanders), which he saw or communicated with on nearly a daily basis. In fact, the vast majority of books discussing Slim at any

length have comments from key subordinate leaders relating that fact. Almost to a man, they state the significance Slim had on them during the reconquest of Burma and the influence he had on the rest of their careers.

Perhaps, Slim's ability to develop leaders at the lower echelons of command (company level and below) has been overlooked. During the battles of Kohima and Imphal, and Mandalay and Meiktila, it was the performance of the 14 Army junior leaders that greatly influenced the overall outcome. These junior leaders were developed in part by some of the actions Slim undertook when he assumed command of the 14 Army. Each of these actions was crucial in developing skills and building confidence in junior leaders. A summary of these actions follows in the next paragraph.

First, Slim gave guidance to his commanders to increase patrolling in jungle terrain. By doing this, he built junior leader confidence, built Soldier confidence with their leaders, and squashed the myth that the Japanese owned the jungles.²¹ Second, Slim gave guidance to his commanders to conduct more small unit offensive operations against out-manned enemy positions. By doing this, he again built junior leader confidence, built esprit-de-corps in these units, and squashed the myth of Japanese superiority.²² Finally, Slim gave guidance to build a number of rest and reinforcement (training) camps within the 14 Army. The focus of these camps was to afford Soldiers an opportunity to rest, but just as importantly, to train on skills they may be deficient in or would use in the future. Once again, these camps developed leaders at the small unit level and instilled confidence within them.

Improving Actions--Building

The second way an organizational level leader can improve his unit is by building. This involves spending time and resources to improve teams, groups, and units and to foster an ethical climate.²³ An organizational level leader builds his unit in two ways. First, he must build combat power within his unit. He accomplishes this by task organization decisions, resourcing, and preparing for execution while still meeting the human needs of the organization. Second, he must build teams within his unit. He accomplishes this by developing and training them and sustains them by creating a healthy organizational climate.²⁴

In building combat power, Slim did this in a number of ways as the 14 Army Commander. First, he emphasized the use of air resupply to move equipment, ammunition, and supplies to the front. This had a tremendous impact on improving the capabilities of these units. Second, early in his command, Slim visited supply depots in the rear and found that critical classes of supply were not getting to the units that needed them. After a few one-way discussions, the flow of supplies to the front greatly improved. Third, Slim spent a great deal of time and energy to lessen the impact that diseases (particularly malaria) had on his Soldiers. When Slim took command, the ratio of cases of sickness from disease to battle casualties was 120:1. After Slim's increased emphasis and ensuring leader involvement, this ratio dramatically fell to 6:1 when the campaign ended.²⁵ This translated into a vast increase on the number of Soldiers available for combat operations. Finally, throughout Slim's command of the 14 Army, he made critical task organizational changes to ensure he had the needed combat power at the decisive point of the operation. Additionally, he utilized his reserve to increase

combat power when the situation called for it. This occurred when he sent his reserve to repel the Japanese Ha-Go offensive in the Arakan and when he sent his reserve to augment his forces at Meiktila.

In addressing building teams, Slim again took actions instrumental in the reconquest of Burma. First, although perhaps appearing insignificant, Slim asked Mountbatten if his command could be called the 14 Army vice the Eastern Army. Slim believed the name Eastern Army had negative connotations amongst his Soldiers. He wanted to begin anew and naming the command the 14 Army was looked upon favorably by Soldiers and leaders. Second, when Slim took command, he did not bring in his own staff. Slim kept the staff that was already in place. This was not common practice and his decision was a huge boost in morale for the staff. This action set the conditions for a superb relationship between commander and staff. Finally, from the day Slim took command, he stressed that every unit conduct realistic training. This not only included combat units, but combat service support units and staffs as well. Although Slim only had a matter of months before combat operations increased in intensity, this training was critical in building the teams that would retake Burma.

Improving Actions--Learning

The third and final way an organizational level leader can improve his unit is by learning. This involves seeking self-improvement and organizational growth. It includes envisioning, adapting, and leading change.²⁶ Within his organization, he must create an environment that encourages his personnel to learn from their own experiences and those of others. Organizational level leaders set the tone for this honest sharing of experiences by acknowledging that not all experiences (even their own) are successful.²⁷

There have been few military leaders in history who have placed as much emphasis on learning as Slim did. As highlighted throughout this thesis, Slim conducted extensive self-analysis on his performance. He honestly admitted he made mistakes as a leader and strove to learn from each one of them. It is obvious during the reconquest of Burma, that Slim utilized many of these lessons on the battlefields of India and Burma. Chief among these was the lesson of taking the bolder course of action, which he tragically learned as a brigade commander near Gallabat. Slim took the bolder course of action when he executed the Operation Extended Capital plan. The payoff for this particular operation was setting the conditions for the reconquest of Burma.

From all accounts, Slim was not a micro-manager dictating every move by his subordinate leaders. He allowed his leaders to determine how they were to accomplish their missions. He encouraged initiative and knew that at times this initiative would lead to mistakes. He trusted his subordinates and was sure that they, just like himself, would learn from their mistakes. This environment was particularly critical during the fighting in Kohima-Imphal and Mandalay-Meiktila. During this fighting, windows of opportunity were fleeting and initiative was crucial in taking advantage of them. This initiative sprung from a unit that stressed self-improvement and organizational growth.

In summary, Slim made tremendous contributions to the reconquest of Burma. From instilling his vision, to training and equipping his organization, to making critical decisions on the battlefield, Slim was instrumental in the success of the 14 Army. Conceivably the 14 Army and the Allies would have eventually retaken Burma without Slim. However, there can be little debate that Slim transformed a group of beaten Soldiers into an organization that believed in itself and its purpose.

¹U.S. Army, Field Manual 22-100, *Army Leadership*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, August 1999), vii, (here after cited as FM 22-100).

²*Ibid.*, 1-11.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*, 1-12.

⁵Earl Mountbatten, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Commander, South-East Asia, 1943-1945* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1952), 276.

⁶The author interviewed Lieutenant Colonels (retired) Thomas Bradbeer and Robert Rielly. Both are assistant professors for the US Army Command and General Staff College, Leadership Instruction Division. Both possess superb reputations for their knowledge in the theory and doctrine of military leadership.

⁷FM 22-100, 1-7.

⁸*Ibid.*, 2-27.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*, 6-17

¹²Michael Calvert, *Slim* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 159.

¹³FM 22-100, 1-7.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 2-27.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 6-22.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 2-27.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 1-7.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 2-28.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 6-26.

²¹Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 188.

²²Ibid., 189.

²³FM 22-100, 2-28.

²⁴Ibid., 6-28.

²⁵Michael Hickey, *The Unforgettable Army: Slim's XIVth Army in Burma* (Kent, England: Spellmount, Ltd., 1998), 91.

²⁶FM 22-100, 2-18.

²⁷Ibid., 6-29.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

It is felt that there is much to be gained by studying the leadership skills, actions, and attributes exhibited by Slim not only during the Burma Campaign, but also throughout his career. It is difficult to narrow these many positive traits into a more concise form. However, what follows are those most relevant in today's environment--an environment which places a premium on up-front leadership at all levels.

Hopefully, this conclusion will enlighten some leaders. This in turn may influence changes in their leadership philosophy. To others, these may simply reinforce established leadership patterns; thus giving them confidence that their current practices are battle tested and proven. Whatever the case, for all leaders, there is much to be admired and emulated from Field Marshal William Slim.

In beginning to look at his leadership actions, one action quickly comes to mind. This is Slim's truthful admission throughout his career that he made mistakes. Slim readily admitted making mistakes and understood his subordinates would do so as well. He understood that no man was perfect and that included himself. Although Slim did not expect perfection, he did expect not to see the same mistake twice and that all should learn something positive from the mistake.

In today's environment, there must be emphasis on not cultivating a zero defects mentality. This mentality can quickly lead to drops in morale within individual Soldiers and units and stifle initiative. Leaders must acknowledge, publicly and from within, that they will make mistakes and admit when they do. They cannot immediately find a scapegoat to transfer blame or ridicule. These actions breed contempt and tear apart the

trust in a unit. Just like Slim, today's leaders at all levels of leadership must acknowledge mistakes and more importantly, learn from them.

This thesis highlights the special relationship Slim had with the Soldiers in his command. Consequently, many of the traits today's leaders at all levels should emulate from Slim are related to Soldiers. First, is his practice of visiting Soldiers. Throughout his career, Slim would visit Soldiers at every possible opportunity. Even as an army commander, he spent nearly one-third of his time talking and meeting with Soldiers. He would be there to praise them, to lift their spirits when the times were difficult, or even to give them a little kick when the situation required a slight attitude adjustment. Basically, he was simply there and with it the Soldiers knew he shared the same hardships they endured.

This practice of "simply being there" is critical in the fighting involving the Global War on Terrorism. With many of these fights taking place in urban areas and with small numbers of Soldiers, it can be difficult for leaders to circulate around the battlefield. However, in this environment it is just as important for Soldiers to see their leaders at all levels as it was in any other war. Leaders cannot get a sense of the human dimension of war if they spend their time in their command posts.

Related to Slim's commitment to visiting his Soldiers was his superb ability to relate to all types of Soldiers. From the private to leaders at the highest levels, Slim could find something in common with each of them. This led to breaking down communication barriers and allowed all those he came in contact with to be much more open to his ideas. It was if Slim possessed some sixth sense, which enabled him to find the one thing he had in common with an individual Soldier or with an officer that out-ranked him.

What is critical for today's leaders at all levels to understand is that this attribute is not gained overnight. Leaders must take the obvious first step of visiting the Soldiers. There is some innate talent in relating to Soldiers. However, a leader's ability to relate to Soldiers is improved through experience. Leaders at the organizational and strategic levels should remember their "roots" and how valuable this was at the direct level of leadership. For most leaders at the higher levels, the quality of their visits with Soldiers is just as important as the quantity of visits.

Leaders at all levels should reflect on the individual planning process and philosophy of Slim. Most important was the visualization process Slim used before giving intent and guidance to his staff. Slim understood the criticality of conducting his own commander's estimate in his unit's decision-making process. He ensured that he had a complete understanding of the terrain, the enemy, and his own forces. Once he knew these three key elements, he related his thoughts to his staff and they would begin the planning process.

This is an excellent example of a commander being thoroughly involved at the beginning of the planning process. Slim's practice of knowing himself, the terrain, and the enemy is just as important today. In today's environment, when planning time for an operation may be drastically reduced, the initial involvement of the commander is vital. Just as Slim, a commander must conduct his own estimate and share these conclusions to his staff in order to initiate the planning process. This can only help to facilitate the unit's planning process and ensure that the commander is comfortable with the initial plan.

An end product of the planning process was Slim's belief that verbal and written orders to his subordinates should not dictate how they should accomplish their mission.

He was a firm believer in letting his subordinate commanders determine how they would accomplish the mission. He would provide their task and purpose, thus setting the conditions for his subordinate commanders to exhibit initiative on the battlefield. This initiative was critical throughout the reconquest of Burma when the situation on the battlefield changed constantly and fighting took place in numerous locations.

These above conditions are reminiscent of the fighting currently taking place in Iraq and Afghanistan. In fighting an unpredictable enemy, it is a necessity for commanders to provide as much initiative as possible on the battlefield. If this initiative is not allowed on the battlefield, valuable windows of opportunity cannot be exploited. Subordinates cannot wait to gain approval from their commanders to initiate an action, if it falls within the constructs of accomplishing their purpose. Slim gave his subordinates this freedom and this freedom is vital today.

The critical reason why Slim's use of initiative was so successful in the 14 Army was he trusted his subordinates and just as importantly, his subordinates knew Slim trusted them. From supply to administration to combat, Slim gave his staff and commanders a mission and trusted them to accomplish it.

Another insight related to planning and decision-making was Slim's trait of fighting the enemy and not the plan. In other words, when the situation changed on the battlefield, Slim was not tied to his original plan. This was especially critical during the reconquest of Burma when Slim's complete focus was on the destruction of the Japanese forces. This relates directly to Slim's decision to adjust his plan to seize Mandalay, when the main Japanese defense belt was further east than anticipated.

Slim's trait of fighting the enemy and not the plan still holds true today. Commanders must build in enough flexibility in their plan to take advantage of opportunities when they become available on the battlefield. A commander tied to his plan severely hampers his unit's chance for mission accomplishment. Commanders today, just as in the past, must remember that the enemy always has a vote.

Not only during the Burma Campaign but also throughout his career, Slim was a devoted practitioner of conducting realistic training. Slim prepared his units to go into combat through tough, demanding training. More importantly, Slim continued this regimen during combat operations. Throughout the Burma Campaign, Slim gave his subordinate commanders guidance to pull units back from the frontlines when the tactical situation permitted it. His purpose in giving this guidance was twofold. First, he wanted to give his units and Soldiers a well-deserved break from the rigors of combat. Second, he wanted these units and Soldiers to conduct realistic training on skills they needed to improve upon or to train on tasks they would conduct in future operations. Slim's decision to conduct this training paid huge dividends in the reconquest of Burma.

Slim's practice of wartime training has great relevance in today's environment. During the fighting in the Global War on Terrorism, leaders should consider opportunities to withdraw units and Soldiers from combat operations to conduct realistic training. This is important for two reasons. First, if negative trends appear during combat, steps must be taken to quickly train on the requisite skills or tasks that may not be being performed up to standard. If steps are not taken to train on these skills or tasks, units could fail to accomplish their mission and suffer increasing casualties on the battlefield. The second reason is this training can only help in building the confidence of units and

Soldiers. Soldiers build confidence by training on specific tasks and believing they can conduct the task in a combat environment.

One of Slim's most admired traits was his written and oral communication skills. The area of oral communication skills has been addressed numerous times in the thesis. Although he was not an eloquent speaker, such as his commander Mountbatten was, he did possess the rare abilities to relate to all Soldiers, keep them engaged, and accomplish his purpose with the majority of his talks with Soldiers.

Slim's talents in written communications were just as strong as his oral communication skills. Although his memoirs, *Defeat into Victory*, were written well after the war, they are an excellent example of his writing skills. In fact, many military historians believe this book is one of the finest examples of writing regarding World War II.

Slim valued the capabilities of written communications with his subordinates. One of the key areas in which he utilized written communications was in writing his commander's intent in operations orders. He states, "I suppose dozens of operation orders have gone out in my name, but I never, throughout the war, actually wrote one myself. I always had someone who could do that better than I could. One part of the order I did, however, draft myself--the intention. It is usually the shortest of all paragraphs, but it is always the most important, because it states--or it should--just what the commander intends to achieve. It is the one overriding expression of will by which everything in the order and every action by every commander, and Soldier in the army must be dominated. It should, therefore, be worded by the commander himself."¹

Most of today's leaders understand the importance of communication skills. However, many may not conduct a sincere self-assessment of their abilities. Many may have a distorted view of their skills in written and oral communications. Consequently, they do not take the first step in admitting they need improvement in these areas and subsequently, seek out assistance to improve their capabilities.

Leaders today should seek out opportunities to improve their communications no matter what their skill level may be. One of the best opportunities available to improve these skills, in a relatively nonthreatening environment, is in the military education system. Most schools afford the opportunity to receive assistance in writing and provide numerous opportunities in the program of instruction to refine their oral communication skills. With these opportunities in place, it is up to the individual officer to make the most of them.

Earlier in this discussion, the subject of commander's intent was introduced. Slim insisted on crafting his own intent for all operation orders. It is important for all commanders to heed the practice of Slim. However, it is the experience of the author and documented in many sources that a number of commanders do not write their own intent in the operations order. These commanders normally leave this critical part of the order for one of their staff officers to construct. Consequently, the portion of the order, labeled commander's intent is not personally authored by the commander.

Today's commanders who do not write their own intent must understand its importance and value in contributing to their unit's success. Their intent is critical for the following reasons. First, it is the one location in an operations order in which an element of personal language and articulation can be utilized. This intent can inspire those who

read it and have a positive effect on morale. Second, it allows the commander to communicate with Soldiers, who he would otherwise not be able to communicate with in person. Third, as the name suggests, it is the commander's intent. It is doctrinally the one location in the operations order designated for the use of the commander. Finally, a well-written intent will tie the unit's mission with its concept of operation. Consequently, it will allow for initiative on the battlefield by all subordinates. This results because subordinates understand what the commander considers important in accomplishing the overall unit mission. Thus, if a subordinate sees an opportunity on the battlefield that would contribute to accomplishing the units purpose; he is encouraged to exploit this opportunity. As a caveat, this opportunity must fall within the limits of the operation and not hinder the ability of other units to accomplish their missions. The ability of a commander to instill initiative in his subordinates on the battlefield is very powerful. In order to reap the true benefits of this tenet of Army operations, a commander must write his own intent.

Slim was a devout believer in the virtues of military education. As a student, he strived to take advantage of the opportunities existing within the curriculum. This included working on his weaknesses and stepping outside his comfort zone to learn about subjects he was unfamiliar with. Additionally, as highlighted in Chapter One, Slim served with great distinction as an instructor. Critical to his success was his desire to teach and make a difference inside the classroom. He gained a reputation of being a superb instructor with students and fellow instructors alike.

Like Slim, today's leaders must take advantage of their time spent within the military education system. As students, they should force themselves to explore subjects

they might not be “subject-matter experts” in. Most importantly, they must share ideas and listen to their classmates. It is critical to keep an open mind and learn from other’s experiences. They must understand that this is a special opportunity and that they can reap many benefits, which will positively impact their career.

Finally, and perhaps the most important of Slim’s traits to emulate, was his overall understanding of the criticality of morale on the battlefield. During his entire military career, Slim held firm in his belief that success on the battlefield hinged on the human dimension of war. This was accentuated by his experience in the Burma Campaign. In an environment where terrain and weather negated many of the strengths of the weapon systems on the battlefield, it was the individual Soldier who primarily influenced the outcome of the majority of battles.

Slim understood this and spent a great deal of his time on the issue of morale. In the early days of each of his commands during the Burma Campaign, he began by conducting a thorough assessment of his unit’s morale. He did this by talking to his Soldiers. Obviously, he found that in each case, morale was quite low. Most importantly, he found out why morale was low. With this knowledge, Slim gave specific guidance to his staff and subordinate commanders to address these causes.

The most important action Slim conducted regarding morale was his insistence that his guidance be followed. It was routine for him to visit units of all sizes to talk with Soldiers to ensure implementation of his guidance. If it was not being implemented, Slim held the senior commander responsible. In total, Slim’s actions worked extremely well at all levels. His ability to turn around the morale in his units was critical to the reconquest of Burma.

The Global War on Terror has impacted soldiers' morale in three key ways. First, the nature of the fighting, which includes urban close combat and extensive use of booby traps, is extremely taxing physically, emotionally, and mentally on the individual Soldier. Second, the fighting locations for many Soldiers are severely harsh environments. These are characterized by rugged terrain (particularly Afghanistan), brutal weather, and few amenities to the Soldiers. This environment daily takes a toll on a soldier's morale. Finally, the number and duration of deployments not only impacts the Soldier on the ground, but his family back home. Certainly, there is a significant strain on the Soldier and his family.

The total of these and a myriad of other factors must be addressed by commanders at every level. With a war depending so much on the skills and abilities of individual Soldiers and small units commanders must focus on morale. Just as Slim, commanders must understand the morale of his Soldiers at all times. The only way to do this is to visit Soldiers and talk to them. A commander cannot rely on reports from his staff. The only true way for a commander to gauge morale is to see it for himself. This gets more difficult for a commander as his span of control grows. However, commanders at higher levels need only look to Slim if they believe they do not have time to visit and talk with Soldiers.

In one significant way, current commanders face one challenge that did not impact Slim as much as it does today. That is the effect a soldier's family can quickly have in the area of morale. With the capabilities of satellite telephone and electronic mail, a Soldier and his family can communicate often. This is in stark comparison to Soldiers in Slim's command, who would wait weeks for a letter from their families back home.

The result for today's commanders is that if a family is not being taken care of back home, a Soldier soon finds out. Certainly, this will have a negative effect on the morale of any Soldier. Consequently, a commander must approach the morale of family members in much the same manner as he does his Soldiers. It is essentially the same process that Slim executed while in command. First, the commander should make continual assessments on family morale. This is difficult because distances make face-to-face contact almost impossible. A commander has several alternatives he may utilize. These include electronic mail, phone calls and video teleconferences with family support group leaders. These open communication channels are the most critical aspect in this entire process. A commander should also receive regular updates from trusted agents, such as rear detachment commanders to reinforce his own actions.

If a commander does believe there are issues negatively affecting families, he must quickly act upon them. The longer he lets issues fester, the more negative effect they will have upon his Soldiers. If possible, the commander should deal directly with the issue, especially if it is of significant magnitude. However, again, distances and the combat environment may preclude a commander from personally acting on the issue. Therefore, he must issue specific guidance to subordinates and most importantly, follow through to ensure compliance. He must always ensure that he understands the effect a soldier's family has on morale and subsequently, its impact on the battlefield.

In summary, although the CBI Theater is often called "the Forgotten Theater," there is much to remember about the overall performance of Field Marshal William Slim. The above conclusion has highlighted several of Slim's traits, actions, and attributes. It is believed that today's leaders, at all levels, would be wise to study Slim and emulate

certain characteristics as applicable. Perhaps, Mountbatten best summarized Slim's performance and its value to others in a comment he made late in his life in 1970. He stated, "The reconquest of Burma by the 14th Army under Slim remains a classic in the art of generalship. Only a man of the highest judgement, nerve and skill could have achieved this *tour de force*. History may well decide there are more important lessons to be learned from Slim's handling of this campaign than from some of the larger and more spectacular battles on other fronts."²

¹Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 210-211.

²Robert Lyman, *Slim: Master of War, Burma, 1942-1945* (London: Constable and Robinson, Ltd., 2004), vii.

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