

Military Lessons of Burma Campaign: World War II

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Preamble

The Burma Campaign during World War II (WWII) is often known as the forgotten war due to the major focus on the war in Europe. Fought by a combination of nationalities on the allied side, the British Commonwealth, consisting of the Indian, British and Canadian soldiers, the Chinese troops and the US soldiers, it provided a common rallying point against the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA). The campaign was one of the longest in World War II due to the intermittent weather and inhospitable terrain and began with the invasion of Burma by the 15th Japanese Army in 1942 and ended with its defeat in 1945. War in Burma necessitated the fighting formations to acquire skills, both military and survival, due to a myriad combination of terrain, climate and thick forests and a formidable enemy. This necessitated momentous changes in restructuring of units and formations, training methods and a tactical reorientation to achieve victory. A large theatre of war, with a primitive communication network made conduct of large scale operations exceptionally difficult. Given the scarcity of resources due to the dedication of major effort towards the war in Europe, detailed logistics planning and resolute leadership were the key to success while fighting a highly trained and ruthless opposition.

Military Lessons of the Campaign

The Burma Campaign, due to a multi-national troop composition, inhospitable terrain and weather conditions provided a multitude of military lessons, at both strategic and operational levels. The terrain and enemy dictated modification of tactics and led to the development of many new concepts; a majority of them are practised today and are part of the operational philosophy.

Burma Campaign was one the longest campaigns of World War II.

Lessons at Strategic Level

Strategic Aim: The Burma theatre was characterised by the conflicting aims of the participant countries. For the Japanese, Burma was the western edge, securing which was essential to guard against any allied attack. It was also the only land supply route to China. Once Burma was occupied, China would be isolated and its defeat would be easier. At that stage, the IJA had no plans to advance to India¹. The allied forces had conflicting aims which led to a clash of priorities for the liberation of Burma after the Japanese invasion. For the British planners, Burma's liberation was a low priority as defence of England was paramount. Hence, availability of resources to the Burma theatre was the last priority. On the other hand, the Americans were providing material support to China with an aim to tie down Japanese troops within Asia, thereby reducing the chances of their deployment in other theatres. The US considered Burma as a vital area for the air and land supply route to China in its war against the IJA. The Chinese intentions were not discernable at times which led to piecemeal distribution of resources, thus, diluting the war effort.

Intent of Higher Commander: The overall aim of the commander must be clear and well defined. Defeat of the Japanese Army in Burma was the centre of gravity for Fd Mshl Slim. It was conveyed to all the commanders, giving them freedom in the execution of plans, ultimately leading to the defeat of the Japanese troops.

Evolution of Land-Air Cooperation was one of the important lessons of the campaign in jointmanship. The Third Tactical Air Force was co-located with 14th Army Headquarters which enabled integration of the air effort from the inception stage of operations. The deployment and maintenance of forward troops (the Chindits, with 30,000 troops and 5,000 animals) for several months and use of air-landed brigades at Meiktila and in pursuit to Rangoon resulted due to sound planning between the two organisations. Air supply was to become a cornerstone of jungle warfare all over the world.

Lessons at Operational Level

Campaign Planning Principles: Fd Mshl Slim had assumed command of the 14th Army in 1942. The formation had been forced to withdraw to India and Slim had to undertake major changes in training, raising the morale of the men, and carry out planning for a counter-offensive at a later stage. He advocated four basic principles for operations².

- The ultimate intention must be an offensive.
- The main idea of the plan must be simple.
- The idea must be held in view throughout and everything else must give way to it.
- The plan must have an element of surprise.

He insisted that operational orders must be kept short to avoid information overload and advocated ruthless enforcement of standards during training. In his view, every soldier was a rifleman and should be able to fight when required.

Reorganisation and Training: The defeat and subsequent retreat to Assam after the First Burma Campaign led to reorganisation of formations and refocus on basic training, with emphasis on specialist training in jungle warfare. The harsh terrain of Burma with its formidable rainforests and lack of roads required troops to have high levels of physical fitness and also be acclimatised to ward off the threat of diseases.

- The major reorganisation was the restructuring of the highest controlling headquarter with the creation of the Southeast Asia Command (SEAC), with the 14th Army as the land component.
- A mixed transport structure³ along the mechanical and animal transport lines was adopted at the division level to improve mobility and tactical effectiveness. It was implemented with 7 Indian Division being the first formation to be organised along the new scaling. A component of 56 mules was added as the first echelon element for supply of essential stores. Later, four more divisions, 14, 20, 23 and 26 Indian Divisions were reorganised on the new scaling⁴.
- Major emphasis was laid on retraining of the formations. Instructions were issued on tactics and jungle warfare in the form of the Army in India Training Memoranda (AITM) and Military Training Pamphlets (MTP). The AITM 14 of February 1942 presented jungle warfare tactics. Though the AITMs were issued, there was not sufficient time for preparation in many cases and the implementation was peacemeal at times. It was evident in the defeat of

14 Indian Division during the First Arakan Operation. It convinced the military leadership to establish centrally controlled training schools in jungle warfare as well as lay down a clear distinction between basic training and specialist training. 14 and 39 Indian Divisions were organised as jungle warfare training divisions. A jungle warfare school was established at Comilla, and later relocated to Darjeeling in 1943. The school conducted 15-day short courses in patrolling, field craft, minor tactics, establishment of roadblocks and living off the land. Collective training was practised from company upwards up to division level to assimilate the new training philosophy and gain on the job expertise.

The Japanese tactic of “**The Hook**” led to a large number of allied casualties in the initial stages. The action involved carrying out a holding action in the front against allied emplacements and then moving a mobile force on a wide turning movement through the flank. The allied commanders would move resources to deal with the mobile force and, thus, would, at times, denude the forward defences. The Japanese would then increase pressure on the forward defences which would lead to collapse of the defended locality. The introspection against this Japanese action led to the development of all round defence. The AITM 15 issued in March 1942 conceptualised two new fighting methodologies⁵.

- All round defence would be adopted as the standard defended locality in jungles in place of linear defence, with mobile reserves to counter enemy action. The box formation was successfully adopted to defend against many Japanese onslaughts, with the Battle of Admin Box as a classic example.
- The high wastage rate of men due to terrain and diseases necessitated that soldiers of all the services, including the non-combatant category, needed to learn infantry tactics and be able to fight as infantry in jungles. This action provided inbuilt reserves within the unit and led to higher availability of fighting hands.

Logistics

Terrain in Burma indicated that the axis of movement ran from north to south. The Irrawaddy River and its tributaries flow from north to south. Hence, the principal roads and railway lines were constructed along the rivers with culmination at Rangoon which was also the access point to the sea. The most feasible direction to invade Burma was from the south as the Japanese did in 1942. The counter-offensive from India would be over mountain ranges covered with thick jungles,

and supplies had to move along low capacity lines of communication in the form of metre gauge rail link and a single road link, Imphal-Tiddim into Burma. The second deciding factor for logistics planning was the monsoon, which extended from April to September. Heavy rains obliterated tracks and made movement through the jungles almost impossible. It also led to a high sickness rate. The major lessons learnt were:

- *Integrating Logistics Advisers at the Planning Stage*
 - The Burma theatre was a low priority area and the planners had to conduct operations with meagre resources. Limitations were placed on the scope of the operation. This necessitated a dedicated logistics team working in close coordination with the operational planners.
 - The troops of 15 Corps were supplied by air in the Battle of Admin Box for months which resulted in the soldiers holding onto their locations against all odds and giving a befitting reply to the Japanese. This was due to the logistics advisers being aware of the commander's aim and having made plans in anticipation.
 - The road network in Burma was prone to frequent disruptions due to weather and Japanese action. A boat building yard was constructed on the banks of the Chindwin River to construct small barges to augment the supply capacity before the allied counter-offensive in 1944.
- *Invention by Necessity or Improvisation:* Scarcity of resources led to a number of improvisations for execution of operations. The concept of improvisation is in vogue even today. Two notable improvisations were use of jute parachutes for sustaining troops of the second Chindits operation, as silk parachutes were not available and jute was in abundant supply in Bengal and Assam. The second was modification of jeeps and fitting them with rail wheels to enable their use on rail lines for movement and resupply.
- *Location of Medical Units:* Poor lines of communications necessitated location of medical units close to forward defences. It reduced the evacuation chain besides providing medical facilities as forward as possible. It also ensured that the soldier was away from his unit for a shorter duration.

Tactical Lessons

The expansion of the British Indian Army in 1940-41 had led to a poorly trained and ill-equipped Army with a large percentage of inexperienced officers and soldiers. Their employment in internal security duties in Bengal had resulted in limited or negligible peace-time training. After the retreat to Assam in 1942, Brig

RT Cameron, commander of 48 Indian Brigade, wrote a report on the failings of the First Burma Campaign and possible solutions. This formed the basis for retraining of 17 Indian Division. The emphasis was on “back to basics” and involved relearning battle drills as suited to the jungle environment.

Lessons from First Burma Campaign led to evolution of All Round Defence.

Patrolling emerged as the chief element of success in the jungles. The terrain layout, with heavy forest cover, meant that there was no distinct line of defence and there were large stretches of no-man’s land. Proficiency in routine area patrols, connecting patrols within the defended area and prolonged observation patrols became essential. The concept of Long Range Patrols (LRP) by Orde Wingate, designed to operate deep behind enemy lines, to disrupt supply chains and harass enemy troops, was a novel idea which met with limited success.

Reconnaissance troops was another concept practised with a battalion level force, which would operate ahead of the advancing division and maintain contact with the enemy as well as provide information on enemy dispositions.

Establishment of a commando platoon was planned at the battalion level. The platoon provided the battalion commander with a highly trained and physically fit entity to be employed in any eventuality.

Leadership: A Key to Success

Leadership of a mixed nationality Army combined with the toll due to enemy action, disease and terrain was a challenge at all levels. Four aspects of transformational leadership⁶ were well demonstrated by Fd Mshl Slim during the campaign;

- **Idealised Influence:** Fd Mshl Slim generated a collective sense of mission in the troops. He made himself familiar with his troops and propagated that everyone’s effort led to success of the mission. Soldiers, thus, had a sense of purpose and his actions inspired confidence in his command. *Half scale rations* is an ideal example in this regard. If any forward formation had to go on half scale rations due to shortage of supplies, Slim’s HQ would also be on half scale rations.
- **Inspirational Motivation:** Fd Mshl Slim emphasised with his commanders, the need to engage every man so that the individual felt part of the system. He regularly visited troops in forward locations and interacted with them. His knowledge of many languages was handy in breaking the barriers of communication and raising the morale of the soldiers.

- **Intellectual Stimulation:** Fd Mshl Slim's conferences were not conducted like dominating discussions but were a platform to voice opinion freely about any problem. As a leader, he was respectful to his subordinates, approachable and a good listener. He was ready to accept mistakes provided the subordinate commanders learnt from such acts.
- **Individualised Consideration:** He believed that the direct approach to an individual was the way to achieve a surge in his fighting spirit. He was more interested in the strengths or weaknesses of his subordinates rather than the rank or status. This facet created a sense of credibility of the leader.

Maintenance of morale at all times was essential to motivate soldiers who were fighting multiple enemies; the Japanese, the local climate and the scarcity of resources. Fd Mshl Slim promoted spiritual, intellectual and materialistic factors as the basic foundation pillars in maintaining high morale. Spiritual training was the first focus area as spirituality enables a man to withstand strain. Also, the men had to be inspired by a cause. Intellectual training was the next aspect, as human beings are swayed by reason and feelings. The intellectual pillar was strengthened by the scale of training, from small to big, which meant that every objective was attainable. Good discipline, a theatre newspaper that provided correct information to the soldiers so that they did not fall prey to rumours and establishment of high quality rest and recreation camps complimented the effort. The material aspect received the last focus as high morale would obviate the scarcity of resources.

Conclusion

The Burma Campaign provided valuable lessons which are applicable even today to military professionals at all levels. The "back to basics" model practised by all units in the present security environment is indispensable in maintaining high training standards to achieve success against the enemy. Besides tactical acumen in the operational area, junior leaders can take inspiration from the leadership ethos practised by Slim and his commanders. It is an essential facet in the present-day digitised world and the well informed educated soldier. Lastly, when faced with an intricate situation, a leader must remember that sound values and high morale can overcome any adversity.

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Notes

1. Brian Bond and Kyoichi Tachikawa , eds., *British and Japanese Leadership in Far Eastern War: 1941-45* (Routledge, 2004), p.106.
2. Steven Jermy, *Strategy for Action: Using Force Wisely in 21st Century* (London: Knightstone Publishers, 2011), p. 195.
3. Daniel Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in Burma Campaign* (Westport, USA: Praeger Publishers, 2003), p. 86.
4. Tim Moreman, *The Jungle, Japanese and the British Commonwealth Armies at War, 1941-45* (Routledge, 2014), p. 56.
5. Kaushik Roy, ed., *The Indian Army in Two World Wars* (Leiden Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV Publishers, 2012), p. 82.
6. Aivars Purins, "Uncle Bill of the Forgotten Army or the Leadership of Field Marshal Lord Slim," *Baltic Security and Defence Review*, Vol. 10, 2008, p. 212.