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THE OPERATIONS OF A GUERRILLA COMPANY
(OSS DET 101) AT LAWSAWK, BURMA
6 MAY - 12 MAY 1945
(CENTRAL BURMA CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: GUERRILLA COMPANY IN
THE DEFENSE

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THE OPERATIONS OF A GUERRILLA COMPANY
IN THE DEFENSE (DET 101 OSS IS THEATRE)
PERIOD 6 MAY - 12 MAY 1945
(Personal experience of a Company Commander)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of a guerrilla company of the 1st Battalion in action during the period 6 May - 12 May 1945.

Since the Burma theatre was one of the least active, as far as American forces were concerned, it will probably be a distinct advantage to the reader if a rather brief introduction of the entire Burma Campaign be outlined herein. The combat operations in Burma actually conducted by Americans in force were for all practical purposes three. These were: (1) the 5307th Composite Group, consisting of 2997 officers and men, more popularly called Merrill's Marauders; (2) the Mars Task Force and (3) OSS Det 101. This does not mean to distract from such personnel who operated with the Engineers, Chinese, or British Units of which there were many.

The initial Japanese attack of Burma commenced in December 1941 for by this time the Japanese forces had overrun all of the Malay Peninsula and parts of southern Burma. (See Map A)

The City of Moulmein fell to two Jap Divisions on 30 January 1942. (1) From this point on a token resistance was offered by forces composed of British, Indian, Burmese, RAF and AVG. It was not taken by any means for those involved, considering the equipment available to them. Burma was simply a military back water which was employing 1914-18 tactics without any trained leaders against two highly trained modern Japanese Divisions. Despite this it took six weeks before Rangoon fell to the Japanese. (2) After the fall of Rangoon on 8 March 1942 the route of Japanese progress extended in two directions. One Jap division (1) A-5; (2) A-13.

continued up the Sittang River where it met General Stilwell advancing with his Chinese forces to protect the Burma Road while the other division advanced up the Irrawaddy in pursuit of the Indian and Burmese forces. On 2 April Toungoo on the Sittang River and Prome on the Irrawaddy River had fallen to the Japanese. These actions hardly slowed the Japanese advance and on 4 May 1942 the Port of Akyab was captured. This completed the evacuation of southern Burma. (3)

A third Japanese force consisting of two divisions which had landed at Rangoon on 12 April 1942 were advancing through the Shan States to attack Lashio thus flanking Mandalay which was evacuated by Chinese defenders on 1 May 1942. (4) After the fall of Lashio this force pushed on up the Salween into the Chinese province of Yunnan.

In the North Central Sector the Japanese had sent patrols up the Irrawaddy almost as far as Ft Hertz and on the West had captured Kalewa on the Chindwin River. This action ceased due to the arrival of the monsoon season which means upwards of 200 inches of rain during the period June to September and as can be very readily seen would certainly impede any operation whether it be mechanized as was the European theater or restricted to foot troops as nearly the entire Burma Campaign was. As soon as the monsoon had ceased Japanese advance again was undertaken. The Japanese Forces in the Akyab area became very active in October 1942 and pushed northwest from Akyab toward Bengal. Here the British counter-attacked but not in sufficient force, therefore were unable to hold and forced to withdraw. In February 1943 the Japanese were closing in on Suvarnabhumi thus threatening to complete the entire occupation of North Burma and destruction of the British led Kachin and Gurkha Levies. (5)

At this time the Japanese held all of Burma but a few of the hill tracts, swamp, and jungle on the North and West of Burma. This

(3) A-1, I. 3; (4) A-1, F. 3; (5) A-1, I. 3

position bolstered the Japanese. ~~Nowhere~~ In several ways; its flank was protected from the West, they had succeeded in severing the land supply route to China, and last but far from least they had added the rich natural resources of Burma to their own. (6)

In Spring of 1943 the allies tired of being on the defense assumed the role of the Aggressor by launching a diversion force called Wingates raiders. (See Map B) This force was composed of Gurkha, British, and Indian troops. They advanced from the Chindwin River westward ~~toward~~ ~~the~~ ~~Myit~~ ~~thine~~ ~~crossing~~ a distance of 1000 miles. Their entire action can be summarized by their commander, General Wingate, when he said, "the vulnerable artery is the line of communication winding through the jungle". (7) Based on this strategy and very thorough training Wingates force struck the Myitkyina, Mandalay railway as their primary objective putting it out of operation for a four-week period and also severed and annoyed the entire Northern Japanese forces lines of communication. After operating along these lines of action for a six-week period the force broke up and by individual small groups all made their way back to India. This action proved one thing to the allies that the Japanese were not supermen in the jungle and with units properly trained the Japanese could easily be coped with.

When Wingates force had been proven a success it inspired the formation in August 1943 of the First Air Commando Force under Colonel Philip Cockran to support any future paralleling operations. (8) In order that this air group would not be idle a similar but larger force to Wingates was formed called Merrills Marauders. This force was to be made up of American jungle trained soldiers who would volunteer and was formed by such men from the Southwest Pacific and Caribbean Defense Command. This force was turned over to General Stilwell in January 1944

and was immediately put into action along with two American trained Chinese Divisions on an advance down the Hukawng valley to capture Myitkyina. At the same time General Stilwell was starting his drive, two British Divisions were starting down the Arakan front but were immediately confronted with a Japanese force attempting a drive northward into India. At this time there were five Jap Divisions along the border of India: 55th in the Akyab area, the 15th, 31st, and 33rd were in the Chin hills organized for a strong offensive, and the 18th ready for any advance from Assam. It so happened that the force which contacted the British was a diversionary force attempting to divert the British reserve while their main force was taking Imphal. In March 1944 a Japanese force of 100,000 crossed the Chindwin River (See Map C) and struck their main blow at Imphal and Kohima. The British had foreseen this action and had ordered their outlying division to withdraw to Imphal which he had prepared as a jungle Stalingrad. However the speed of the Japanese attack had not been foreseen and when Imphal was hit the city was manned by 3,000 British, this force held on for three weeks until relieved by the 33rd Indian Corps.

After three months of fighting the siege at Imphal was broken. (9) The Jap had suffered a severe blow, 50,000 killed, which was as much a turning point in his success in Burma as it would have been to the allied cause if he had been successful. If his attack had been successful he would have achieved the following: Forced General Stilwell to withdraw to protect Ladd and succeeded in capturing the Assam airfields which would sever the air lift bases to China. It can be easily seen that at this point the allies were definitely on their way back.

In August 1944 Myitkyina fell after ten weeks of very difficult

fighting, the British had followed up their advantage and by the last of August the last Japanese had been forced from India and the British had fought back to the Chindwin.

By early 1945 the Mars Task Force had continued from where the Marauders had stopped and succeeded in opening the Burma Road by securing Naakpakka. The British were on the Mandalay plains on the western bank of the Irrawaddy. Here the Japanese centralized their force to meet the British attack. However the British marched 200 miles south and instead of striking at Mandalay proper struck the Japanese at Meiktila. On the 20th March Mandalay fell.

Throughout the entire Burma Campaign, the ground work for the Japanese had been laid by Japanese inspired fifth column activities. These activities began in 1941 prior to the attack of Burma. In 1941 30 Burmese went to Japan and at the time of the invasion returned to act as interpreters and guides. The initial Japanese successes coupled with the fifth column activities of these 30 Japanese trained Burmese encouraged large numbers to join the Japanese cause.

The initial plan of the Japanese invaders was to make Burma a puppet state in alliance with Japan. (10) With the pro Japanese Burmese this was not difficult. A Burma National Army was organized, a Constitution and a new government were set up. August 1, 1943, Burma was declared independent and declared war on the allies while signing an alliance with Japan.

Generals Stilwell and Donovan quick to see the huge advantage such an organization would be to any invading forces seized upon the idea of retaliating with a similar force. It was not difficult to locate such people. In northernmost Burma was a hill tribe called Kachins. During the Jap invasion these people had resisted purely

because of their hatred for the Burmese who had turned pro Jap. Their resistance had not been organized but was definitely there. All that remained to do was organize, lead, and supply these Kachins. It was not necessary to teach them the jungle, the tactics or any similar requirements such a force of Americans might need. The tactics would be the same as hunting a game trail, simply lie in ambush but instead of gathering the game leave it lie and look for more elsewhere. The big picture called for all of these activities to be closely coordinated with any military operations either existing or future. (11) Such an allied organization was formed and designated OSS Det 101. This was in early 1942 and consisted of 20 officers and enlisted men. Later this organization expanded until at the end of hostilities numbered approximately 750 officers and enlisted men.

Det 101 operated throughout the Burma Campaign and achieved in the words of Colonel John G. Coughlin "a mission which has no precedent in our history." (12)

In the early part of 1942 the operations entered into by Det 101 were purely experimental and of no large scale. The first operation consisted of dropping natives into Burma south of Myitkyina. This group split into two groups, one group planting charges on the railway and the second group blowing the railroad bridge across the Namkwin River. Both groups managed to evade the Japs and marched out to Ft Hertz successful and not too much the worse for wear.

During this period a base was established at Nguala in the triangle area interested primarily in intelligence and small harassing operations. Both missions were highly successful and served as a basis for future operations. These same tactics, intelligence seeking, ambush, demolition of enemy installations and harassing of Japanese lines of

communications proved highly effective throughout the campaign and reached their peak during the period August - December 1944, at which time the unit consisted of approximately 10,000 guerrilla troops.

(13)

THE DETACHMENT SITUATION

The operations of Det 101 were supposed to have ceased as soon as the Stilwell Road had been secured by the combat troops. As soon as these troops secured the road the situation in China called for them to be shipped to China immediately. This left Det 101 in a precarious position, since most of the guerrilla troops were by this time many miles from home and had been promised that as soon as Lashio had been taken they were free to return to their homes, but were now the only troops available to NCAC to further secure the Burma Road. High powered reenlistment programs followed, those still desiring to return home were discharged and flown as near their home as possible while the 1500 desiring to continue were supplemented by Karens, Ghurka, Shan and Chinese troops and undertook the mission General Saltan had ordered, which was to further secure the Burma Road by taking the Taunggyi - Kentung Road and clearing that area of all Japanese troops. This action was spearheaded by the 2nd Battalion whose initial move was to Loilem. This was in April 1945. The other three battalions, the 10th, 3rd, and 1st, followed shortly thereafter and by 1 May 1945 (See Map D) operating on the principal of approximately half of the force in each battalion applying frontal tactics while the other half were operating 20 to 30 miles in front of this frontal drive, harassing lines of communication.

(13) A-11

THE BRITISH SITUATION

The British had, previous to this, fought their way to Mandalay had passed a corps south of Mandalay striking at Meiktila which was a crippling blow and the primary failure in the Japanese planned defense of Mandalay which fell to the British on the 20th of March. The British were now pushing south to Rangoon. On 3 May 1945 the British invaded Rangoon from the sea and secured the city on 5 May 1945. This left the battalions of Det 101 with a great deal of responsibility since the Japs cut off at Mandalay by the British strategy were attempting to move to the east and thus into Thailand via the Taunggyi Kentung Road which was also the route of prime importance for those caught between the two British forces.

THE 1ST BATTALION SITUATION

The 1st Battalion found itself located (See Map E) on the edge of Lawksawk, a key point for the Japanese in maintaining an open route to Thailand. Two companies were acting as the front against Lawksawk while two other companies were operating further south with harassing operations. Lawksawk was situated in a perfect place as far as defense was concerned, its south and east sides were protected by a lake, its approaches from the north were over wide open fields as were the approaches from the west. It must be brought out at this time that tactics that were required to capture the village were not those which our troops were proficient at. After several set backs of our vain attempts to capture Lawksawk, an isolation program was decided upon. The two companies facing the village radioed for 4.2 chemical mortars and set about a general harassment with these weapons, coordinated with patrol action on all sides.

At this time it is appropriate to go into rather a detailed

plan of organization of a guerrilla organization. This will be

be any standard and such organization depended entirely on the dreams of the company commander. My company was made up of the following:

Headquarters

-) 1 Radio operator
-) 2 Subedars
-) 4 American sergeants
-) 4 supply personnel
-) 3 Interpreters

Weapons Section Armament

-) 2 30 Cal. machine guns
-) 4 60-mm mortars
-) 1 81-mm mortar
-) 1 4.2 mortar

Rifle Section Armament

-) 1 Bren gun
-) 1 Carbine
-) 6 Cal. 45 sub-machine guns

Sections were composed of eight men squads. The straight line sections contained nothing but fire power, 1 British Bren gun, 1 asst Bren gunner armed with a carbine, 6 45-cal machine guns with a few rifles interspersed. These sections were not rigid and were changed as the situation dictated. The company was one half (115 Kachins) and one half (110 Churka) troops which is a religious problem to be avoided if possible.

THE COMPANY IN DEFENSE

Prior to the 5th of May the entire company starting this isolation moved into position 2000 yards north of Lawksawk while a second company moved in from the west. The position was not the commanding ground due to the fact the Japs held that. However, it did put us into what we considered a secure position. Also we controlled the only route to the north and planned by patrol and ambush to control the routes to the south. This

control to the south was maintained by the third company of the battalion

BUT NOT IN AS HIGH AS MOUNTAIN HOSPITAL QUARTERS WOULD HAVE PLACED THEM.

On May 5th we received an intelligence report that the Japs in the area south of us were making a concentrated drive to reach Thisland by the Taungyi Kentung Road. However it was classified as poor but did create a few diversionary thoughts of a good plan for our meager force to adopt in case of a large scale push. That afternoon we figured the report had some basis since the company to the south reported action against reinforcements headed for Lawksawk. About 1800 we got hit not in force but by patrol action only later about 2000 hours their mortars began firing and they were accurate. This continued until we withdrew and allowed them to occupy the hill. The company withdrew about 500 yards and remained until daybreak 6 May 1945, at which time the hill was retaken. It was here that terrain was really our ally, practically in a half moon to the north and west of our position on the retaken hill ran a ridge line. It was decided to put only a small portion of the company in our present location and to move the rest of the company to the ridge line and prepare for a good defensive action if forced into it.

(See Map E)

These positions were prepared with as little show of force as possible in the new position but with a show of force made to let the Jap think the entire company was still located at our old position. The plan of action was to have the forward portion of the company hold off any attack as long as possible then fall back due north and enter our perimeter from the northeast and become the reserve. The primary reason in not falling straight back into the perimeter was twofold; a small river which had to be crossed in order to get to the CP and the danger of entering the front of the perimeter during a fire fight which would be the only reason for the forward outpost to be coming into the perimeter. These plans were also based on the fact that the Japs we were fighting was not organized, he had been badly pushed around for the last two years, during

which he survived mainly from the country, he was poorly equipped and ammunition was a precious commodity to him.

By the night of the 6th our perimeter was quite formidable but needed further work so with a prayer and a hope we sweat out the night. Nothing stirred not even one shot was fired. All day the 7th was spent in checking the perimeter and one patrol was sent out to the east simply to spot any action of which the Japs might be partaking. This patrol returned about 1700 with a report of only normal action taking place in Lawksawk. Said report calmed our nerves and found us quite at ease with night approaching. However the perimeter was to still remain at 50% alert and radio contact with the forward outpost was to be made hourly via 536, and on the even hour with the company on the west via SCR-300.

About 0200 on the 8th all hell broke loose. A messenger from our road block alerted the company with a report of action on the road block but no firing or attempt to breach the block. Immediately contact was attempted with the forward outpost and everything was reported as being quiet. Not two minutes later it really hit. The report from our forward OP had come through just prior to the Jap initial attack and was the last report by radio we received. Sporadic firing began then increased in tempo until it was impossible to distinguish between our own and Japanese firing. All of it however was happening at our old position. Evidently the Jap never suspicioned our moving. The next action was a bansai attack of which we could hear but could get no actual report. Grey streaks had by this time started to appear in the sky and every one was praying desperately for daylight. As we now know this initial attack was small scale and was repulsed. Within the next 30 minutes which seemed like eternity two additional small bansai attacks were launched

the Jap figuring to surround the company was regrouping and employing an encirclement because as it became light enough to see our main perimeter was looking directly into the backs of approximately 60 Japanese preparing to attack our old position from the north. The element of surprise was terrific. However the range was a little long for sub-machine guns but the Bren guns and one 30 caliber machine gun certainly did wreak havoc. Now it was daylight, our rear position was committed but our forward outpost was surrounded. All attempts at radio communication to either the outpost or the adjacent company failed, all wave lengths, even those on our 300's carried one message, the war was over in Europe. What a beautiful jamming job they were doing to our communications. And who gave a damn right now about Europe anyhow.

After the initial shock was absorbed by the Jap at some great cost he immediately attempted to reorganize and assault our main position, which held beyond my wildest dreams until about 1030. At this time a Japanese captain led a large scale banzai which succeeded in breaking our perimeter in two places but cost him his life. My Subedar Major with his dah succeeded in decapitating him without receiving so much as a scratch. With these two breaches of our perimeter, no reserve, and ammunition running low it was decided our best plan was to withdraw. During the confusion our OP had withdrawn to our perimeter. But here the Jap had beaten us to the punch, our only route of withdrawal was covered by Japanese fire. There was no alternative because if the encirclement was completed as it might be at any time our position was hopeless.

The company was now broken into three groups, two to fire to the front and either flank and the other to protect our rear. By laying down a tremendous wall of fire we succeeded in making our withdrawal successful and left behind only our dead, all the wounded were rotten out. We

reorganized at Myeni and took head count. We had 27 wounded including two of the American sergeants and only six dead compared with over 100 dead Japs and unknown number of wounded. The next four days were spent in withdrawing to a location where it would be feasible to put in a light plane strip to evacuate our wounded. This problem of evacuation is one of the greatest encountered by a group of this kind.

The company on the west had suffered a fate similar to ours therefore we consolidated. It was extremely fortunate that neither of us had been able to withdraw to help the other because the Jap had planned on this. Our road block of which I spoke earlier was never molested but was left open to invite us toward the west company and every bit of the trail was heavily booby trapped and ambushed.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

When the combat troops were withdrawn and 101 was assigned the mission of securing the Burma Road it was certainly high level planning. I say this because if the Japanese had in any way decided to drive north again in any force our battalions would have been about the equal to what the initial defending troops of Burma amounted to.

The plan of operation as it worked out was highly successful. The Taunggyi Kentung Road was secured except for the small portion at Taunggyi, an area 100 miles in depth was cleared of approximately 10,000 Japs. The Japs losses of over 1200 to our less than 400 were the highest inflicted on a guerrilla operation during the entire Burma Campaign.

If the Japanese in this area had been the same Jap we fought in northern Burma our force would not have lasted for two days. against a top notch enemy as the Japanese were at one time. Guerrillas are highly effective if employed as such but are hopelessly lost in

attempting infantry tactics.

Due to the fact that I employed my troops as I best could at the time I feel it is up to others to criticize and I will accept such criticism only if proven in error.

LESSONS

Some of the lessons emphasized by this operation are:

1. Guerrilla troops should be employed as such.
2. All agent reports unless actually witnessed by yourself should be thoroughly checked before any information on such reports is disseminated.
3. Radio broadcasts should be restricted from military channels or vice versa.
4. Close coordination must be employed at all times.
5. An air evacuation system where air superiority has been achieved should include helicopters.
6. Guerrilla operations can be employed by Americans successfully as this list of accomplishments of Det 101 will support: over 5,000 Japs killed, captured and flew out 75 prisoners, assisted in rescuing 300 allied airmen, derailed nine trains, blew 56 bridges, and destroyed 252 vehicles as well as dumps and lines of communication. (14)
7. All action should be in conjunction with the overall military objective.
8. Parachute is the primary means of delivering your organizers of such units.
9. Air supply is the only feasible means.
10. Discipline and behavior of the leader must conform to the ideas of the group not to the taught principles of another society.
11. Esprit De Corps is primary and above everything else.

(14) A-11, p. 17.

12. Such type operations call for personnel with highly stable emotions preferably volunteers.