



The 1945 Burma Campaign and the Transformation of the British Indian Army

By Raymond Callahan and Daniel Marston

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Reviewed by LTC (Retired) Rick Baillergeon

There was a time not so long ago when World War II's China-Burma-India (C-B-I) Theater received scant discussion by military historians. Just as it was during the conduct of the war, it was clearly the "forgotten theater" for decades following the war. However, in recent years, we have seen a significant increase in interest and books published on subjects related to the C-B-I Theater. One of the newest volumes released in this genre is Raymond Callahan and Daniel Marston's outstanding volume, *The 1945 Burma Campaign and the Transformation of the British Indian Army*.

As the title suggests, this is not a general overview of the 1942-1945 Burma Campaign. Instead the authors have narrowed down their focus dramatically. They specifically, as the title suggests again, key on two areas. The first area is to discuss and analyze the Indian British XIV Army's reconquest of Burma from the Japanese in 1945 after a demoralizing retreat just a few years earlier. The other focus is on detailing the changes the British Indian Army went through following the retreat and how these changes set the conditions for future success. Let me address the treatment of both next.

I believe the volume does an excellent job of concisely providing readers an understanding of the 1945 Burma Campaign. In order to fully appreciate the campaign, readers must fully grasp what the British Indian Army overcame to get to that point. The authors do an excellent job of doing this for readers. With those conditions set, they highlight the key battles, leaders, and turning points which were a part of the campaign. This discussion is outstanding and will be especially beneficial to readers who may possess limited knowledge and understanding of the campaign.

For those who do own a solid background, the discussion on the transformation of the British Indian Army is the clear highlight. I found this conversation to be incredibly valuable. The authors address the significant changes and reforms which took place in the organization following the 1942 retreat. They stress the criticality of these actions in this passage: "Without these reforms, including recruiting enough volunteers from South Asia to create the largest all-volunteer army in history, and the need and desire for Indian officers to fill command and leadership positions, the outcome in 1945 could have been very different."

Any book focused on the Burma Campaign will undoubtedly feature Field Marshal William Slim. Callahan and Marston have not strayed from this. Throughout the entire book, the authors emphasize Slim's influence and the incredible leadership he displayed throughout the overall Burma Campaign. They summarize Slim's entire performance in the following segment: "After leading Burcorps out of Burma in 1942, he played a crucial role in the remarkable military renaissance that transformed the Indian Army and then, with that reborn army, won two

defensive battles in 1944 that fatally damaged the Imperial Japanese Army in Burma. In his campaign of 1945, the most brilliant feat of operational maneuver by any British general in World War II, he reconquered Burma, shredding his Japanese opponents.”

To craft a focused book such as this, it is imperative that it is written by authors with subject matter expertise, and Callahan and Marston clearly possess these credentials. Both of these authors have firmly established themselves as experts in particular areas of the Burma Campaign. In regards to Callahan, he has crafted several highly regarded volumes on aspects of the overall Burma Campaign. In the case of Marston’s catalog, he has been much more focused on the British Indian Army itself. Each of their niches is displayed prominently within the book.

I believe there are three significant strengths which contribute to the superb quality of the volume. The first is the exhaustive research conducted by the authors. Obviously, the authors make outstanding use of the previous sources they have utilized in their past books. However, they have significantly augmented this by delving into newly discovered personal accounts and archival holdings. In total, it is one of the most thoroughly researched books I have read tied to the C-B-I Theater.

The outstanding readability of this volume is the second impressive strength of the book. When a book is crafted by two authors, you wonder about the flow of the volume and if the authors’ writing styles will conflict. In both cases, this is not an issue. This is a volume which is very well-organized and extremely conversant. These attributes enable the authors to seamlessly tie-in their discussion on the transformation of the British Indian Army within the context of the 1945 Burma Campaign. Having read previous Callahan books, I anticipated a well-crafted book and this did not disappoint.

The final strength of the book I would like to highlight is the superb notes section the authors have inserted. The authors have dedicated 50 pages to creating a section which is incredibly beneficial to readers. It includes providing them with the rest of the story, expounding on points made in the main section of the volume, and offering recommendations for further reading on areas and subjects. This is clearly not one of those standard fare notes sections which you simply gloss over.

The 1942-1945 Burma Campaign highlights one of the most remarkable turnarounds of a unit in history. It is an incredible story which fortunately in recent years is now being told by more historians. Raymond Callahan and Daniel Marston have superbly focused on a portion of this campaign. In doing so, they have crafted a volume which will greatly benefit all who read it.