

Abroad Part 3

In the first part of my story I had reached Egypt and in Part 2 I had at long last reached my unit 1st Indian LAA Regiment Royal Indian Artillery in Assam where they were helping to defend the supply route to General Chang Kai Chek's Chinese Army who were defending their country against the Japanese invaders.

We must now move on as the war moved on. The next year was for me a time of busy Army activity and also a lot of natural history interest. We were about to get down to the business of war which would involve separating our Regiment into Batteries, Troops and Detachments and moving large distances with Bofors guns to defend bases established by Allied infantry. Before we started all this, our Colonel was approached by the local headman and asked for help in hunting a tiger which had killed a villager. The Colonel deputed me to lead the tiger hunt through a tea garden and some adjacent woodland. We were guided by local villagers and set off, combed the area and found nothing. I had armed myself with a Bren gun, rifle and two pistols; my troop each had a rifle. We were all in great danger, I from the weight of the armoury I was carrying, my troops from each other and from everyone's lack of training in small arms firing, the villagers because they had no weaponry. Those not in danger were the troops I left in reserve and the tiger itself who was up against our motley crew. How lucky we were to draw a blank in the search but it was a good PR exercise!

The Regiment split a few days later and my Battery was ordered to a spot quite near to the foothills of China about 600 miles upstream on the Brahmaputra River. Here, incredibly, the river was a mile wide. While we were there the rains came to the Himalayas and the river near us was in spate. It was frightening to see gigantic trees uprooted and flowing in the river until they were either caught up against the bank or swept downstream like matchsticks. There was however always the natural history to interest me – strange animals, weird fossils in the soil, huge butterflies, caterpillars and creepy-crawlies of every shape and size. I was able to note how in time of flood when all living creatures are trying to survive, predators and prey forget their natural antipathy and huddle next to each other on safe ground until danger has passed and the water goes down.

I viewed the Chinese foot hills as a possible escape route if the Japanese attacked us and I had my Troop practise constructing rafts of the bamboo which grew plentifully here and which would carry men and Bofors guns. Our Army Commander, General Slim, had other ideas however. He wanted to entice the Japanese army onto the Plain of Imphal and trap them there while our 14th Army mopped them up – then to mop up the whole of Burma. Happily General Slim, known to those of us under his command (but never to his face) as Uncle Bill, knew exactly what he was doing and everything went to plan.

The duty of the anti-aircraft units including mine was to follow our infantry closely and defend every strong point they captured. My Regiment were part of a massive flanking movement to encircle the enemy and it involved secretly moving men and guns several hundred miles southwards and then turning east, crossing the Irrawaddy River and forming the anvil against which our infantry attacking from the North would pin the enemy army and destroy them.

This whole venture went very smoothly for my unit. Allied troops would capture a suitable flat area, the American bulldozers would create an airstrip with adjacent dropping zone, we would deploy our six Bofors guns and a Detachment to man them, then American planes would fly in, drop some supplies in the dropping zone and then land the rest of their cargo. Supply troops would then move in to take over the depots and their defences, and we would move on to the next selected area. In this way our entire advancing army was supplied with food, clothing, ammunition, mail from home,

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bottles of spirits and beer, and occasionally a senior officer from Headquarters or even from India or London. I met General Slim several times, Lord Louis Mountbatten the Supreme Allied Commander in South-East Asia, and the American General Stillwell. General Slim on one occasion travelled by a small plane to see how his forward troops were faring and the plane landed on an airstrip defended by my Detachments. Slim and several staff officers alighted and Slim walked over to one of my Detachments and talked to them in perfect Urdu (he had been using the language for years as a regular Officer in the Indian Army). One of the Gunners on the site telephoned me and I went immediately. Uncle Bill lived up to his reputation; he was as courteous and kind to me as he was to the Detachment manning the gun position – who were utterly charmed and most impressed with his red tabs and colourful uniform. He was so obviously a man of power that for the next week or so my troops were reluctant to take orders from a mere Captain (me). Fortunately my Jemadar was a tough old boy who brought them to earth with the not so silent threat of his anger.

Lord Louis Mountbatten was charm itself. He came round to see and introduce himself to as many men of the 14th Army as he could. It was easy to understand how Roosevelt and the Americans had been pleased to appoint this charming popular proven brave man as Commander in Chief of the Allies' South-East Asia Command.

General Stillwell was a very different man. Undoubtedly brave and experienced in military matters he had a reputation for being prickly. I saw him only once and that by coincidence. I was leading the vehicles, guns and men of my Troop and came to a level-crossing where the railway crossed the road. We stopped to let a train pass but it turned out not to be a train but an engineers' trolley operated by two men moving an arm up and down to propel it. And sitting on a wicker chair on the trolley was an American general – Vinegar Joe Stillwell. I saluted him as he passed. He took the cigar from his mouth called "Hi ya bud" and went on his way.

My Regiment was nearing Pagan, the old capital of Burma, when I received orders to hitch a lift with one of the American supply planes and fly out to Chittagong and then go by train to Saugor, a town in the centre of India, and take a small arms course and examination. To me this was priceless. I had been firing Bren guns, rifles and pistols in anger and here I was going to learn how to use them! Like a good soldier I said nothing, flew out to Chittagong and on by rail to Saugor accompanied by my Orderly, Gunner Fateh Baz. We were both terribly airsick even on that short flight. At Saugor we were novelties, dressed in our jungle green uniform, among all these recent arrivals from England, but we enjoyed the two-week break from our routine front-line duties. We had to return the same way as we had come and this involved having to hitch a lift by American supply plane from Chittagong back to Pakokku where my Regiment was about to cross the Irrawaddy river and join the mass of troops who were going to prevent the enemy from escaping southwards and eastward into Thailand (then called Siam).

When I rejoined my troop I found they had been involved in a mix up in which they intercepted orders meant for the infantry – to give covering fire to troops crossing the river by firing at the top of a pagoda across the river in Pagan. My men did as they thought they had been instructed but used Bofors guns rather than rifles causing the top to be blown off the pagoda. It was an error, but good shooting. I had not realised my chaps were so accurate!

We were making slow but steady progress towards Rangoon which we entered during the early part of May 1945. I was appalled at the sight of Rangoon; the rubbish and filth was knee-deep, the road surfaces were crumbling and those Japanese who were fit enough to do so had fled. The Allies had just beaten the monsoon as well as the Japanese army. I suspect this was DESPITE ME rather than in any way because of me!