



British Army Lieutenant Desmond F. Earley, Essex Regiment

Like many others of my age I served six and a half years in the army during the Second World War from the age of 21, starting as a private. Much of this period was very humdrum, first learning to be a machine-gunner then moving about the country to repel an enemy who was expected to invade but who never did. Had he invaded I doubt that I would be here now since with others, I sat on the Kent coast opposite the French ports where the Germans were massing boats and barges prior to an invasion that did not happen. In 1942, after the threat had passed, I was sent to Lanark in Scotland to train as a machine gun officer and commissioned into the Manchester Regiment and then later the Essex Regiment. In 1943 I was drafted to serve abroad - destination unknown but presumed to be North Africa where Montgomery was gathering his troops to take on Rommel at El Alamein. It was an exciting prospect for a young man, even in those dangerous times.



Lt Desmond Earley

Taking responsibility for a small party of men in a large force of several thousand, which included a group of Polish officers who had escaped from the German invasion of their country via the Middle East, we embarked on the liner Athlone Castle in Liverpool docks and set sail on 15th April 1943. A few days later we joined a convoy and escort and first sailed west to baffle any submarines before turning south towards Africa. Most of the young men, like myself, travelled very little in those days before the war, so it was a fascinating journey, albeit that we could be torpedoed at any time. After a very long journey of nearly six weeks including a routine stop at Freetown, we sailed to our delight into Cape Town harbour and the hospitality of the South African people.

My own future had changed dramatically, however, since I had contracted jaundice and I was put ashore into a Cape Town hospital. Here I shared a comfortable ward with a few other officers including Gover, the English cricketer, and with the help of food and fruit unknown in wartime England I soon recovered. As my original convoy had now sailed I was lucky enough to enjoy local hospitality for a few weeks longer.

After three weeks I was ordered to take charge of a small party of soldiers and four deserters in handcuffs - not the best of company. My orders were to take this party to Durban and to handcuff the deserters to their bunks every night - not an easy task and not to their liking either. But it was an interesting journey across Africa and three days later I joined a second transit camp in Durban where again, like many servicemen, I enjoyed the hospitality of the local people. My ultimate destination had now changed and I was ordered to join a troopship bound for India. I remember, like many others



who sailed from Durban, hearing a lady opera-singer whose name we never knew, singing across the water as we left harbour, "When they sound the last all clear how happy we shall be ...". It was a very moving experience.

I arrived in Bombay some two weeks later - a teeming city and quite an experience to us sheltered Europeans. Like most troops I was soon ashore and bound for Doolali transit camp, a huge faceless camp well known to the British Army in India. Orders for my destination were not long in coming and I was required to join the 1st Battalion of the Essex Regiment as their machine gun officer.

At about this time General Wingate had led a brigade of troops, later called Chindits, to operate behind the Japanese lines in Burma. This they did with great effect causing so much damage that Churchill ordered the creation of a second and larger force of Chindits to operate against the enemy who had now begun their final all-out push into India via Assam and Chittagong. Hence orders were given to Wingate to muster and train a much larger force to harass this dangerous Japanese advance. The Essex battalion was part of this force. Early in 1944, one group of Chindits was landed by gliders well behind the Jap lines to form a redoubt, optimistically called Blackpool, whilst a second followed quickly afterwards. Two of my cousins were killed in this operation and I began to wonder if I would be the third.

I later learned from war records that my battalion was destined by Wingate to follow soon afterwards on a similar mission with the object of taking pressure off the American General Stillwell who was mustering his Chinese forces in the area of Myitkyina. It would have been a dangerous mission indeed.

But suddenly everything was changed when Wingate was killed in an air crash. His death was greeted with mixed feelings by his men who considered him a dangerous eccentric, working direct to Churchill rather than to the India high command, many of whom did not always share Churchill's admiration of the man. One thing certain, however, his death changed our destiny and his successor General Lentaigne quickly altered the use to be made of our own force. We now received orders to penetrate into the jungle in two columns from the area of Kohima to harass the rear of the Japanese forces, which were advancing very fast into India. Kohima at this time was still a peaceful Naga village. Soon, however, after the Royal West Kents took over with a small number of other supply troops, it became the centre of one of the bloodiest battles of the war, bravely but successfully defended with terrible casualties, by a small force against a huge fanatical force of Japanese.

And so we set off into the jungle without any transport other than mules and a few ponies, to operate in the rear of the advancing Japanese and to weaken their advance in to India. Our first brush came when we were ordered to attack the occupied village of Peperkrima which, like all Naga villages, stood on top of a hill. With a certain brash confidence two of our platoons set off through the jungle whilst my platoon gave covering fire support. This was our first experience of the Japs and we underestimated them. Instead of waiting for us to attack they had moved forward into the jungle where



they ambushed our leading platoon and caused terrible casualties. It was a dire lesson that we did not forget.

In this action, as in others, we were always concerned about our wounded left unattended in the jungle at the mercy of the Japanese. For their part the Japs had little respect for either prisoners or wounded and in any case had few facilities to evacuate them even if they had wanted to do so

because of the distance from their bases. I myself found one of my men who had been bayoneted during the night as he lay wounded. Somehow he survived. We were more fortunate in that, unlike the Japanese, we had retained the goodwill of the Nagas and they were prepared to carry our wounded back through the jungle to a base camp.

Eventually we took our first objective and moved deeper into Assam as far as the Chindwin River, skirmishing with the Japs who always proved a stubborn enemy. The jungle was a difficult place to operate in, since one often only found the enemy when they opened fire and even then you were never sure where they were. On one occasion my batman shouted at me as bullets were hitting the ground near my feet and Major Peter Comber was badly wounded at my side. As far as we knew the Japs later evacuated their position and we moved on again into the jungle. One deadly weapon I had under my command at the time was a flamethrower and giving it to a man to use was like presenting him with his death warrant since he became a priority target for the enemy.

After six weeks the monsoon began and we seemed to be permanently wet although the hot sun proved a good friend when it came out. Throughout our time in the jungle we lived on American K rations dropped on us by parachute from Dakota planes. We laid out and marked by fires a strip of land and hoped our supplies dropped from the plane by parachutes would reach us - which they generally did. The parachutes were welcomed by the Naga women. We were conscious of the fact that the planes might give away our position but we had no choice. We developed quite an affection for the Dakota planes.

After 4 months of marching and fighting our way through the jungles and mountains of Assam (some over 8,000 ft.high) we were very tired, having walked over 400 miles and we had lost a lot of weight. Malaria and dysentery affected almost all of us, but because we were always on the move and the sick had to keep up with the fit as best as



Nagas just in from Japanese lines being questioned by our interpreter.



As we came out.



they could. Only in extreme cases was a man's pack added to the burden already carried by a mule, since they too were suffering and sometimes died of sheer exhaustion, often to the genuine sorrow of the muleteers who looked after them. Some muleteers would not eat themselves until they had found some succulent bamboo shoots for their mule. Ponies died soon after we started since they were not as hardy as mules who were stubborn creatures and carried on almost until they dropped dead.

As for the men themselves, after this period of time we were, as already said, almost completely exhausted, especially as the monsoon made things worse. Officers and men shared the same hardships and the same food, namely American K rations consisting of a packet per meal usually containing a tin of meat, special biscuits (very hard), and a dried fruit bar plus tea or coffee, sugar and a packet of 5 cigarettes. The packet cover was cleverly made of greased wrapping which could be burnt to boil a mess tin of water. Perhaps because of our isolation men and officers were very supportive of each other and discipline was never a problem. Some showed intense fear when we came under fire and froze in their tracks, but almost all held their ground. The most frightening thing in the jungle was that we were never sure where the enemy was.

Knowing that the Japs were probably looking for us, we were always conscious of the need to cover our tracks and remove traces of where we had rested and eaten. Creating one's private latrine space was always a problem and on one occasion a young Irishman, my orderly, setting off into the jungle in search of privacy, had trodden on an anti-personnel mine. He died soon afterwards after apologising, of all things, for having caused so much trouble. I was deeply moved by his words and his death, and wrote later to his young wife expressing our shared admiration for Pat.

During our 4 months on operations we had heard the news by radio, that the Allies had invaded the continent and that the Japanese were beginning to retreat from Kohima. We fervently hoped that our own operation was coming to an end, since we were exhausted. Fortunately it was and after a final skirmish at Ukrul we were ordered to make our way to Imphal which had held out throughout the invasion of India and had been by-passed by the Japs. It was a wonderful day when we entered this large Assam town and we were able to eat our first fresh food for many months. Personally I ate all the fruit I could buy on the market in order to make up for lost vitamins. I was also able to write home to assure my parents that I was still alive and tell them why I had been unable to write. However, we ourselves had been able to receive letters dropped with the rations. The name of our regiment had, of course, been cut from our letters in case they fell into the wrong hands.



Finally we were moved by truck from Imphal to Kohima and then to the railhead at Dimapur. Here we embarked on a train to Calcutta and then Bangalore and the comfort of a well-provided camp. Here we were also offered leave and, when well enough, I ventured as far as Simla in the Himalayas. In those days Simla had a special significance as both Indian and English families used it as a retreat from the intense heat of Delhi. It could only be reached by a small railway which wound up the tortuous mountainside to the small but very English town built on a hillside so steep that the use of cars or buses was impossible and manpower was the order of the day. But it was a lovely town and I wish I could see it again today.



Naga Hills, July 1944.

Later I returned to Bangalore and with others listened with great pleasure to the ending of the war in Europe. Although this was the cause of great rejoicing in Britain, we, in the Far East, were still at war with Japan and preparing for the invasion of that country. We practiced embarking and disembarking since attack from the sea seemed to be the only solution, albeit a very costly one in terms of lives.

But how quickly things can change and the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended our war too. Like many others we were glad the war was over but appalled at the destructive power of the atom bombs and the unleashing of such a terrible new force in our world. The Japanese had fought a merciless war against us but did the civilians of these two towns deserve such a terrible death?

Before leaving India I participated in one further incident in 1946 when my Brigade, of which I was Brigade Major, was called into Bombay to suppress the widespread rioting which followed the mutiny of the Indian Navy and its rapid suppression by the British Navy. For three days we were ordered to assist the police in restoring order in Bombay - not too difficult a task but unfortunately the cause of many casualties. It was also one more message to the British that the time had come to quit India.

And so home again in 1946 to demobilisation and civvy-street. Unlike the First World War, all ranks received the same gratuity, based only on length of service, plus a suit of clothes or slacks and a sports jacket and a pair of shoes. We were also given three months paid leave to find ourselves a job. A letter from the War Office also thanking us for our 'valuable services rendered in the service of our country' plus in some cases, including myself, a certificate of mention-in-despatches. Return to our homes was indeed sweet but I think many of us, including myself, missed the adventure and comradeship of life in the forces.

To learn more about General Wingate and the Chindits go to: [Major General Orde Wingate 1903 - 1944](#)