The Forgotten Army

Quite a few Deddington people served in the Far East, either with the 14th Army or in the RAF in support of it. Les Legerton and Len Plumbe's stories (book pp.155 and 165) both make reference to the difficult conditions encountered while fighting in that part of the world. Len kept an article written by Tom Driberg for *Reynold's News and Sunday Citizen*. Driberg had visited the region at the invitation of Admiral Mountbatten around the time of the Japanese surrender in Singapore; it recounts just how 'hellish' life was and puts into perspective Len's experience of being despatched into the jungle to find crashed aircraft. The following transcription contains some interesting social and political comments of the time.

BURMA IS HELL FOR TROOPS, BUT NOT ALL

Tom Driberg Tells Britain

The Climate. Such films as "Burma Victory" give some idea of it. There are two kinds of heat, dry and damp. At Shaibah (near the Persian Gulf) it is dry: as you open the door to go out of the canteen into the blinding sunlight, the heat catches you chokingly by the throat and seems to fill your lungs, as if you had opened the door of a furnace. In a good deal of Burma, at any rate in the monsoon period, it is damp: matches won't strike, books become mildewed, and nothing you touch is quite dry - an intensely depressing phenomenon.

From early morning onwards you sweat constantly. The slightest effort – even the effort of having a cold bath and drying after it – makes you sweat more. "Heat exhaustion" is a serious condition from which many suffer.

The sun, however, is no longer the enemy that sahibs of an earlier generation thought it. This is one of the great discoveries of the war. In the old days "sunstroke" was supposed to result from exposure to the sun; it was a punishable offence for a soldier to cross a barrack square without his sun-helmet.

Now no one ever wears a sola topi (except a few old sahibs and a few orientals trying to look Occidental). Soldiers work regularly, on the hottest days, stripped to the waist and often hatless.

"PRICKLY HEAT"

To go thus stripped is said to be some protection against "prickly heat" commonest of skin complaints – an acutely irritating rash.

All the same, of a dozen or so airmen at Vizagapatam who gathered round to talk, all stripped to the waist, everyone was suffering, or had suffered, from prickly heat (in some cases septic prickly heat) or other skin trouble.

The Insects, Etc. Everything that you dream about them is true. They are flamboyant, startling, ungainly.

A cameraman, standing on a wooden duckboard after a cold shower, felt something prick his foot. He thought it was a splinter and then he looked down – and shouted for help, for his foot and ankle were swelling visibly. He had been stung by a scorpion. He was in hospital for ten weeks.

Not all creatures are horrific. In a train one night a tiny firefly flew in at the open window and rested on my sleeve, its light pulsating in a constant rhythm.

The Landscape. Infinitely varied, of course: of Ceylon alone, some parts are like Camberley, some more exuberant than Florida, but the characteristic SEAC landscape is jungle.

TRACKLESS MASS

You see the jungle best when flying fairly low over it – from Rangoon to Bangkok, say, or northward over Burma. Its absolutely solid trackless mass of dull green trees – growing so closely together that you never see the ground between them, - stretches in every direction, to the furthest horizon, for hundreds of miles.

There is an awe-inspiring, breath-taking grandeur in the sight: one recalls a quotation from a psalm - "wherein the wild beasts of the forest do move" - and wonders how human beings, brought up in our temperate islands, can ever have hacked and fought and lived through this empire of nature.

SCUM-LIKE VEIL

Now and then, jagged and rocky escarpments erupt precipitously from the trees: they are the only break in the jungle's continuity.

Another typical Burmese landscape consists of paddy-fields. You might think that they were ordinary meadows if you did not, from your own aircraft, see the sheen of the sun's reflection travelling through the bright green scum-like veil of growth that rests on the water, in cobweb-fine balance between flooding and dryness.

There are always a few pagodas, new or crumbling, in sight. Cumulus clouds are spread out below in fleecy wisps, as delicately as painted by Dali.

Other clouds are more formidable. Air-crews need special tropical training before they fly in the monsoon season. The jaunty little Beechcraft Expediter dodges and twists over and round the clouds that swoop suddenly towards you. Black clouds are said to be the worst, snapping off the wings of even Dakotas caught in them.

A rainbow encircling the shadow of your own aircraft, travels with you, crossing rain storm clouds and sunlit patches of jungle……

DOBI DAYS

Because of the constant heat and the constant sweating, clothes and their cleaning are a big pre-occupation for the Westerner in the East.

Khaki drill shorts, bush-shirts, the long trousers that have to be worn in the evening (an anti-malarial precaution) – all these are sent to be washed by the dhobi every few days at least.

Dhobis do not seem to vary their method of washing clothes – which is to bang the garments with the utmost violence against rocks in a stream.

On arrival in a new camp, the traveller invariably unpacks his dirty kit at once, and hands it to the "boy" in charge of his hut, to send to the Dhobi. A popular but absent-minded colonel found himself in a dilemma some time ago. Arriving somewhere in Ceylon late one evening, he tore all his clothes off in a hurry, dug all the rest of his kit out of his bag, and flung everything at a Sinhalese, who stood patiently at the hut door.

Ten minutes later, his own "boy" arrived – and he was more than somewhat set back to learn that he had given all his clothes to a beggar.

COCKTAIL RECIPES

Sinhalese servants invariably address their British rulers as "master" – sometimes coupling the word with an identifying prefix, as "general-master" or "one-leg master" or "M.P.-master".

Whatever the full rights or wrongs of the trouble in French Indo-China, there can be no doubt that the late French regime there was heartily detested, and little doubt that it was rightly detested. Its character was well symbolised by two documents which I found by my bed in a palace in Saigon: one was an elaborate manuscript collection of cocktail recipes, the other was a Vichyite book entitled "Pour Mieux Comprendre la Revolution Nationale", published by the Cochin-China Legion.

In Malaya, the occupying Japanese issued special postage stamps of their own, or over printed existing issues; in Indo-China they allowed the French to go on, all through the occupation, issuing stamps glorifying Petain and the French 'Revolution' - of 1940!

VIPs QUEUE UP

I hardly dare print this … It will cause so much offence.. But some of the most pukka of South –East Asia's sahibs refer privately to French Indo-China as Frog-Wog-Chink…….

During the few days before and after the surrender ceremony at Singapore, Government House was so packed with V.I.P.s that ten brigadiers slept in one room and twelve major-generals in the next. The bathroom queues were most impressive.

If civil government in Burma is to be stable, and the law held in honour, in the interim period before Dominion self-government is achieved, it is urgently necessary that the status of the Burmese police force should be raised. Before the war the police were paid disgracefully low wages; corruption was widespread. It was commonly said: "If a woman was down-and-out, she becomes a prostitute; if a man is down-and-out, he becomes a policeman."

"DESPERATION"

You may have noticed on the back of forces air-letters the printed declaration "Written in ……(language)". The last word was added because so many people filled the blank with "desperation", "a hell-hole called Calcutta" or even ruder words.

* * * *

In command of the South Burma District, with headquarters overlooking a beautiful lake at Rangoon, is Major-General Symes, genial, hospitable, and the only soldier I met in the whole of SEAC who invariably looks clean and cool.

He worships regularly at Rangoon Anglican Cathedral (which the Japanese used as a brewery); has a passion for cowboy tales; and has founded a sailing club on the shore of his lake.

The standard of hospitality of his mess owes much to Sgt. John Williams of Gwanysgor, near Prestatyn.

The shoulder-flash worn in this command is a stork - "because", says the General, "we carry so many of other people's babies".

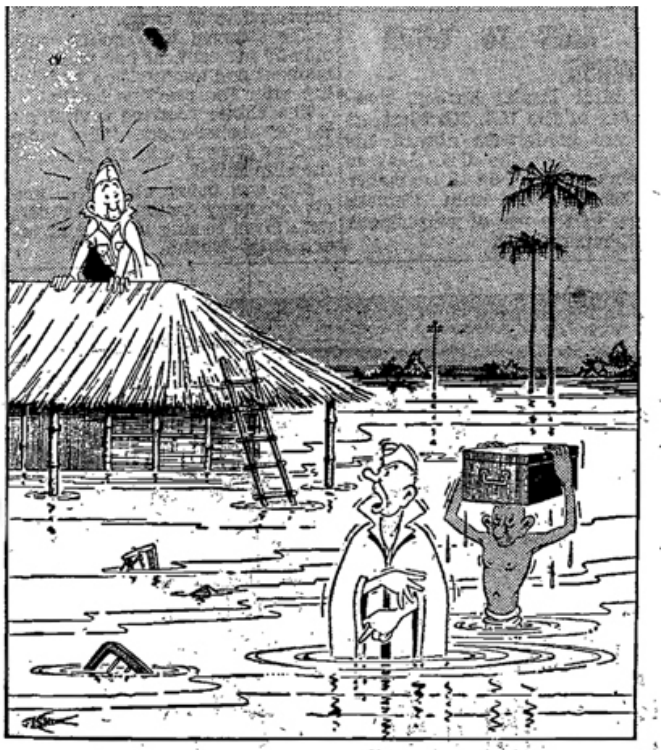
BURMA STAR

When Jack Lawson, Secretary of State for War, visited the troops in Burma, he met many old friends and sons of old friends.

One was Pte Wallie Brown, who comes from a street at Consett that Lawson used to live in. Another was Capt. Graham Bell, with whose father (now a lecturer in economics at Bradford), Lawson went to school.

Of all the multifarious questions that the men asked Lawson, two which recurred perhaps most often (apart from the universal subjects of repat. and demob.) were about the ineligibility of men who have fought in Burma to wear the Burma Star, and about pilfering from parcels mailed to and from home.

Operation Zipper, the great offensive against the Japanese which was almost due to open when the atomic bombs fell – and which was, in fact, carried out with modifications – is said, most unjustly and inaccurately, to be so called because nothing was buttoned up.



"Aw quit bindin', you up there. Yer lucky to ave a roof under yer feet."

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