The Development of a British-American Concept of Special Operations in WWII Burma

By Bob Bergin

Going into the jungle to fight the Japanese was like going into the water to fight a shark.[1]

—Winston Churchill

It seemed an unlikely joint operation. . . . It not only worked, but resulted in a new concept of warfare and established combat techniques that today are used by both regular and unconventional forces.

Introduction

It seemed an unlikely joint operation—led by a British Army irregular warfare expert in conjunction with two hot-shot American fighter pilots and the "air armada" they had created—to invade an occupied country from the sky. It not only worked, but resulted in a new concept of warfare and established combat techniques that today are used by both regular and unconventional forces.

For the British in Asia, 1942 was the worst of times. Their colonial empire had collapsed, the remnants of the Imperial British Army in Burma had withdrawn to India and seemed immobilized, unable to strike back at the Japanese, then poised to move on India. The US effort on mainland Asia centered on keeping China in the war, but when the Americans sought help to build a new overland supply route through north Burma, the British dragged their feet and added to American suspicions that Britain's main military interest in Asia was the restoration of England's lost colonies.

In early 1943, British Army Col. Orde Wingate led his *Chindit* "Special Force"[a] on an overland deep penetration of Japanese-occupied Burma. To senior British commanders in India, the operation was a failure. To Prime Minister Churchill, having the operation take place at a time when he needed a show of British effort for the Americans, Wingate's effort was a godsend. When Wingate asked for American air support for a second penetration of Burma, the US Army Air Force's commander brought into the mix his own interest in expanding air power—and then turned over the creation and command of a supporting force to two fighter pilots. In hindsight, it was a brilliant move. By their nature and experience, fighter pilots blast obstacles out of their way. Their air armada of more than 300 aircraft and 500 highly specialized personnel was ready to take on the Japanese in Burma in three months.

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a. Wingate called his special force "Chindits," a mispronunciation of the Burmese word *Chinthe* for the mythological "lions" that guard Buddhist temples in Burma and in other parts of Asia are called *Singh*. Wingate first used the term in a then-unpublished interview with a journalist in February 1943.

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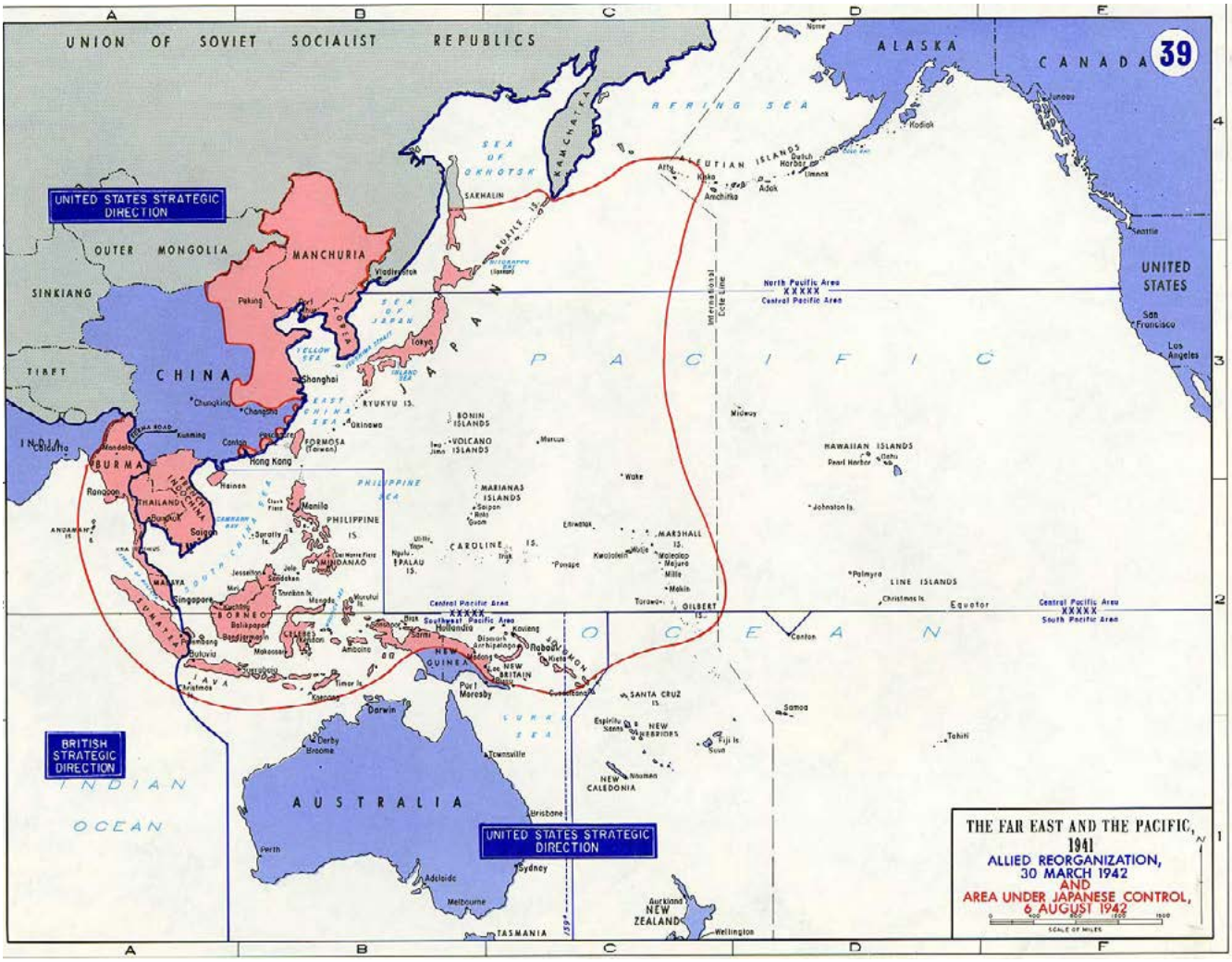


By mid-1942, the Japanese had reached the outer limits of their offensives that began in 1931, when they occupied Chinese Manchuria. Map from US Military Academy: https://www.usma.edu/history/SiteAssets/SitePages/World%20War%20II%20Pacific/ww2%20asia%20map%2039.jpg

Operation LONGCLOTH

February–April, 1943

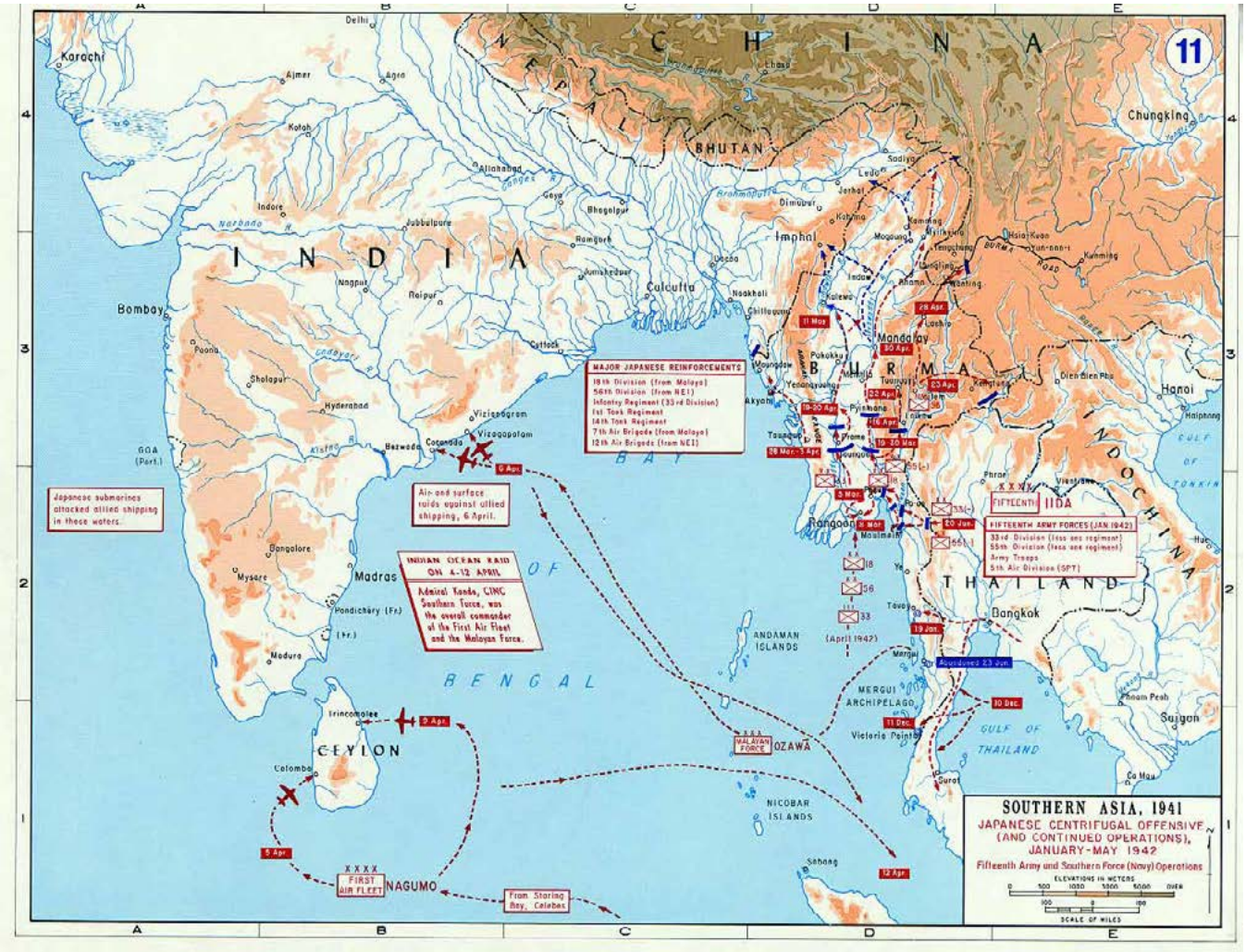
> *As a military operation the raid had been an expensive failure. It gave little tangible return for the losses it had suffered and the resources it had absorbed.*[2]
>
> —Viscount William Slim

They came back "in dribs and drabs," gaunt and exhausted, suffering from malaria, dysentery, and jungle rot. It was a month before the final tally could be made: Of the 3,000 British troops who had entered Burma in early February 1943, only 2,182 had returned to India. And of those, only 600 would be fit for future service. The 77th Indian Infantry Brigade had been behind Japanese lines in Burma for about three months.

"What did we accomplish?" Maj. Bernard E. Fergusson, commander of the brigade's No. 5 Column later asked himself. "We blew up bits of a railway, which did not take long to repair; we gathered some useful intelligence; we distracted the Japanese from some minor operations, and possibly from some bigger ones; we killed a few hundreds of an enemy."[3] When the survivors finally reached Imphal on India's eastern border with Burma, they were tucked into clean hospital beds. "We slept like logs. And we woke up to find we were heroes."[4]

The Burma Victory

In May 1943, the British sorely needed a victory in Burma. The entire country had been occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army since its catastrophic defeat of the British Army the year before. In the year that



The situation in southern Asia was dire in 1942, as Japanese forces occupied Burma in force and threatened India. Map from US Military Academy: https://www.usma.edu/history/SiteAssets/SitePages/World%20War%20II%20Pacific/ww2%20asia%20map%2011.jpg

followed, only two offensive operations in Burma were mounted by the British. The first, on Burma's west coast to take the port of Akyab, had just ended in failure. The other was Operation LONGCLOTH, the long-range penetration of Japanese-controlled territory by 77 Brigade, a "Special Force" whose value was being questioned.

Thanks to astute British propagandists, the British were to have their victory. Even as 77 Brigade was extracting itself from the Burmese jungle, a Most Secret message from the British Army director of public relations in Delhi to GHQ asked that the commander of LONGCLOTH be kept away from the press when he "re-emerged" and be brought immediately to Delhi for a "suitably controlled Press Conference."[5]

On 20 May, the LONGCLOTH commander, Colonel Wingate, was introduced to an overflow crowd of international journalists.[6] As Britain's leading proponent of irregular warfare and its most experienced practitioner, Wingate's past exploits in the Middle East were not unknown. And, despite Fergusson's harsh evaluation, 77 Brigade's penetration of Burma was not without significant achievement. Wingate's Chindits had penetrated deeply into Japanese territory and moved through it at will.[7] More important than the physical damage done to the Japanese was the lesson learned: The raid had been achieved not with elite troops but with ordinary infantrymen, "family men from Glasgow, Liverpool and Manchester." They had shattered the image of the Japanese soldier as master of jungle warfare.[a] Field Marshal Viscount

a. "The 13th Battalion of the King's Liverpool Regiment . . . [was] a wartime unit raised in 1940 and 1941. Few of them

William Slim later wrote: "Skillfully handled, the press of the Allied world took up the tale and everywhere the story ran that we had beaten the Japanese at their own game . . . [was] important in itself for our people at home, for our allies, and above all for our troops on the Burma front."[8]

"The real hero of the hour was Orde Wingate who rapidly became the best-known soldier of the day."[9] The success of LONG-CLOTH added weight to Wingate's theories of irregular warfare and, for Wingate confirmed that his thinking was right. Historian Jon Latimer explained it this way:

> *Perhaps the publicity went to his head. Mike Calvert, commander of No. 3 Column and Wingate's confidant, noted that Wingate's thinking was now significantly different. "When long range penetration is used again,* [Wingate] *said, it must be on the greatest scale possible and must play an essential part in the re-conquest."*[10]

Others were not so sure. Wingate's great supporter, Gen. Archibald Percival Wavell, had just been moved out of the chain of command, appointed viceroy of India, and replaced as Army C-in-C India by Claude Auchinleck, who believed LRPs must be considered in proper perspective: "They are of value . . . if their operations . . . have an effect on the enemy's conduct of the main battle."[11]

Orde Wingate briefing his Chindits. Undated photo
© PA Images/Alamy Stock Photo

Orde Wingate

> *Wingate was a strange, excitable, moody creature, but he had fire in him. He could ignite other men.*[12]
>
> —Viscount William Slim

Wingate was an eccentric, a bearded Old Testament–like figure under a sola topee.[a] He was critical of his tradition-bound army superiors, and "inclined to be imperious and injudicious when interacting with professional peers."[13] His thinking on irregular warfare made fellow officers uneasy, but he produced results. Churchill met him and called him "a man of genius and audacity."[14]

Wingate was commissioned as a Royal Artillery officer in 1923. He gained early experience in bush soldiering in the Sudan, commanding a company of the East Arab Corps in a remote area near the Ethiopian border. In 1936, he was assigned to Palestine, where he organized small teams of Jewish settlers led by British officers in night operations against Arabs in revolt. These became the Special Night Squads (SNS), criticized for brutal tactics, but effective against the rebels.[b] They won Wingate the first of his three Distinguished Service Orders (DSOs) and brought him the attention of then-Major General Wavell, commander of British forces in Palestine, who effectively became his patron in the war years.

As the war in Europe started, Wavell, raised to head the Middle East command, brought Wingate to the Sudan to run irregular operations against Italian forces occupying Ethiopia. Wingate created Gideon

were young by modern army standards, and most were married. They had spent the last months of 1940 and nearly the whole of 1941 in coastal defense in Britain. . . . [and then were] sent to India for garrison and security duties. Sykes, *Orde Wingate* (Collins, 1959), 372,

a. A Wolseley sun helmet, former British Army tropical issue, an "outsized pith helmet of the kind that, as a badge of empire, had long since become a music hall joke." Bierman and Smith, *Fire in the Night*, 148.

b. "The Special Night Squads came to be considered the British Army's first special forces and the forerunners of the Special Air Service regiments." Brown and Louis, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, (Oxford University Press, 1999), 193. (NOTE: This citation is from Wikipedia entry on Special Night Squads.)

Force[a] and used it to harass forts and cut supply lines and, through deception, effect the surrender of 20,000 Italian troops.[b] Gideon Force was given pride of place in the triumphal procession that returned Emperor Haile Selassie to Addis Ababa.[c]

It was Wavell again—as head of the India and Burma command—who brought Wingate to India to run guerrilla operations against the Japanese in Burma. But Wingate arrived in the midst of the British retreat and recognized it was too late for guerrilla warfare. He began to advocate long-range penetration operations.

Long-Range Penetration

Wingate had been mulling the LRP concept for years. Bernard Fergusson first met him in Palestine, and again when Wingate was readying his Ethiopian campaign.[15] When they met in New Delhi in 1942, Fergusson was a member of Wavell's "Joint Planning Staff," where the many plans for the "re-conquest" of Burma were reviewed. The proposals Wingate made then did not vary from principles which he had expounded for many years, as Fergusson recalled:

> *Briefly, his point was that the enemy was most vulnerable far behind his lines, where his troops, if he had any at all, were of inferior quality. Here a small force could wreak havoc out of all proportion to its numbers. If it should be surprised, it could disintegrate into smaller pre-arranged parties to baffle pursuit, and meet again at a rendezvous fifteen to twenty miles further on its route. Supply should be by air; communication by wireless: these two weapons have not yet been properly exploited. His proposal was to cut the enemy's supply line, destroy his dumps, tie up troops unprofitably far behind the line in the endeavor to protect these vulnerable areas, and generally to help the army proper on to its objectives.*[16]

A Meeting in Quebec

17–24 August 1943

> *For Churchill, who believed that T.E. Lawrence's* Seven Pillars of Wisdom *"ranked with the greatest books ever written in the English language," attraction to Wingate was inevitable.*[17]

At the end of May 1943, 77 Brigade was dispersed and given five weeks leave. Wingate used the time to write his report on LONGCLOTH. A copy reached Churchill at a time "when he was having to reconcile Britain's strategic aims with those of his American ally."[18] Wingate received an order to report to London. When he reached there on 4 August 1943, the chief of the Imperial General Staff instructed him to report to 10 Downing Street. It was dinner time, and the prime minister was leaving the next morning for a summit conference in Quebec codenamed Quadrant. Over a family dinner, Wingate expounded on mastering the Japanese in jungle warfare. "We had not talked for half an hour before I felt myself in the presence of the highest quality," Churchill wrote in his history of the war, and "decided at once" to take Wingate along to Quebec "to explain his theories to President Roosevelt."[19]

Held in Quebec from 17 to 24 August 1943, Quadrant brought the British and Americans together to focus on strategy in Europe and the upcoming invasions of Italy and France. But problems in Asia also needed to be addressed, particularly Burma, where the British Army was making no headway. The American goal was to reestablish a land route though Burma to supply China and keep it in the war; the suspicion was that the British effort "was intended primarily to perpetuate their colonial control of that part of the world after the war."[20]

Wingate was Churchill's response, and he stole the show: "In this acrimonious area, Wingate became the point of agreement . . . a warrior, who seemingly evinced disdain for machinations of empire and colonialism." He impressed President Roosevelt and "made a very favorable impression on the American Chiefs of Staff. . . . [USAAF] General [Henry "Hap"] Arnold decided to give him as much assistance as possible."[21]

To support his next penetration of Burma, Wingate asked the Americans for "approximately 16 DC-3 [C-47] aircraft for airdrop and . . . a 'Light Plane Force'" to evacuate his wounded.[22] Bombers he requested

a. A unit of about 1,700 British, Sudanese, and Ethiopian soldiers that Wingate named for the biblical judge Gideon, whose small band defeated a large enemy force.

b. "The British had around 40,000 men in North Africa, the Italians 400,000, a discrepancy which rather ruled out the virtues of head-on frontal attack and put a premium on guile and ruses." Allen, *Burma: The Longest War,* 119.

c. "The men of the 2nd Ethiopian Battalion led the parade . . . the Emperor himself drove in an open car . . . and the whole parade was led by Wingate, riding on a white horse." Royale, *A Man of Genius*, 204.

were promised by the RAF. Before the conference ended, Lord Louis Mountbatten was named as named supreme commander of a new Southeast Asia Command (SEAC). For many Americans, the acronym quickly came to mean "Save England's Asiatic Colonies."

A Meeting with the Chief, US Army Air Forces

Late August 1943

John Alison[23] walked into the Pentagon office of "Hap" Arnold, "and sitting there was Phil Cochran.[a] We had been great friends before the war, in flying school together and in the same squadron at Langley. We had rented a house together." Both men were now lieutenant colonels, accomplished fighter pilots, and air combat leaders. Alison had recently completed a tour in China; Cochran had just returned from North Africa. Both were preparing the fighter squadrons they would lead in Europe when they were summoned to meet with Arnold. Alison recalled:

> *Arnold told us about the Quebec conference, how Churchill had introduced Wingate to Roosevelt, and Wingate's sad story of having no way to evacuate his wounded: Prop the guy up against a tree, give him a canteen of water, a rifle across his lap, and walk away.[b] Arnold said that Wingate wanted to get them out by air, and we would have to provide the airlift. "Which one of you wants the job?" he asked. I immediately said, "General, I don't!" I had the best job in the USAAF and I was going to England.*

Cochran told Arnold essentially the same thing. When he saw that neither wanted the job, Arnold said:

> *I haven't told you what I really want done: Wingate walks in; it takes him six weeks to get into position to attack the Japanese support structure. Enroute he loses men, and they're tired, and have malaria. It just doesn't make any sense for them to walk. I want to fly them in, and then I want them supported on the ground. I will give you all the resources to do the job.*

At Quadrant, Wingate had asked for aircraft to evacuate his wounded and airdrop supplies. There was no suggestion that Wingate or his superiors expected the Special Force to be airlifted into Burma. That idea appears to have originated with Arnold, who was known as an innovator looking to expand the applications of airpower. What Arnold had just told Alison and Cochran was a different proposition; it got their attention. A bit more discussion and then the question, "Can we both go?"

The two Army Air Forces lieutenant colonels, John Alison and Phil Cochran, who would create the First Air Commando Group for operations in Burma. Photograph by Robert T. Smith, courtesy Brad Smith

As Alison was senior in rank he would be the commander, Arnold said. Alison pointed out that Cochran ranked him by two months. "Okay, you're co-commanders," Arnold told them. The two tried to work as co-commanders for about two months, "but it was too complicated and confused the Pentagon." Between themselves they agreed that Cochran would be the commander, and Alison his deputy. Arnold's choice of the two fighter pilots as his commanders created an ideal marriage of talent: their thinking ran on parallel tracks and their personalities perfectly complemented each other's. Cochran was aggressive and outspoken; Alison was relaxed, thoughtful, and diplomatic.

Project 9

> *Colonels Cochran and Alison, both outstanding fighting aces, and, what is not always the same thing, first-class organizers and leaders.*[24]
>
> —Field Marshal Viscount Slim

a. Among Cochran's accomplishments was a starring role in the era's popular Milton Caniff *Terry and the Pirates* comic strip as the character Colonel "Flip" Corkin.

b. The RAF did not have the assets needed to evacuate the wounded by air: "The first year the whole [LONGCLOTH] expedition was supplied by Burbury's 31 Squadron, R.A.F., with three Dakotas [C-47s] and two Hudsons. The Hudsons were a failure; they could not fly down to the speed of the Dakotas . . . they flew so fast that half of the parachutes which they dropped turned inside out . . . and their loads came down woomp and smashed." Fergusson, *Wild Green Earth*, 247.

The operation was named "Project 9" and classified Top Secret. "We had an A-1 priority to get men and equipment, but we couldn't tell anyone why we needed them," Alison recounted. The bigger problem was to figure out how to do the job. "We were fighter pilots; now we were in charge of an aerial invasion." While based in China, Alison had flown over Burma many times. He knew the jungle terrain did not lend itself to aerial delivery of ground troops. Cochran went to London to talk with Mountbatten and Wingate while Alison worked the problem in Washington.

"Parachutes were a possibility; and the idea of gliders was raised. Dick du Pont was at the Pentagon, and I consulted with him." Arnold had initiated a glider program in March 1942 and put America's leading expert on gliders in charge of it.[a] Reading reports on Wingate's first penetration of Burma, Alison noted that the Chindits had taken along a lot of equipment and hundreds of mules to transport it. If that was to be part of Wingate's planned operation, the use of parachutes was impractical.

To Alison it began to appear that the best option might be "to get gliders and a company of airborne engineers, and go into one of the open glades that I knew in northern Burma. We could build airstrips there and move in an army with transport airplanes. Once the troops were on the ground, we would support them from the air." Air support meant not just air drops, but using aircraft in place of artillery pieces. It was becoming clear that Project 9 "would require its own specialized air armada."

Notwithstanding the importance of air transport, mules remained a staple of movement through Burma's difficult terrain. The C-47s and gliders of the Air Commando would fly in about 1,100 of the animals. Photo © Everett Collection Inc./Alamy Stock Photo

Cochran met in London with Mountbatten, and the two got on very well. But his initial meeting with Wingate left Cochran confused: Wingate's explanation of long-range penetration was a muddle. In two subsequent meetings, as Wingate described how his columns moved separately through the jungle as he directed them to their targets, the concept was suddenly made clear to Cochran: "With radio direction Wingate used his guerrilla columns in the same way that fighter-control headquarters directs planes out on a mission. I saw it as an adaptation of air-to-jungle, an application of air-war tactics to a walking war in the trees and weeds. Wingate had hit upon the idea independently." Cochran was impressed: "When I left him I was beginning to assimilate some of the flame about this guy Wingate."[25]

Something else impressed Cochran—mules! To Wingate, "transport meant mules . . . the only way you could get stuff through the jungle was on mule-back. Long-range penetration went clumping along with long ears and a heehaw."[26] Cochran headed back to Washington enlightened. He knew the secret of air support for Wingate, and he burned to tell Alison: "You know what Wingate really needs?" he said. "Yeah," Alison answered. "He needs gliders." The two had come to the same conclusion via different routes. Former American Volunteer Group (AVG) Flying Tiger pilot R.T. Smith relates what came next:

> *The initial plan for the invasion of Burma was a far more modest proposal than what Cochran and Alison came up with . . . . Roosevelt had promised . . . air support. . . . However, Wingate's main concern was to evacuate his wounded, and to supply the columns of troops. . . . He wanted the US to operate a fleet of light planes that could operate out of small, rough strips hacked out of the jungle . . . the British never thought of the possibility of saving many days of forced marches[b] . . . by land-*

a. Richard Chichester Du Pont, of the prominent family, a founder of American Airlines, and a three-time National Soaring Champion. He was killed in the glider crash on 11 September 1943.

b. More recent histories suggest that aerial insertion was included in British talks even

ing their troops in gliders far behind the Japanese lines. . . . Phil Cochran and John Alison came up with this idea, and many others that went into the plan . . . and—with considerable trepidation—presented to Arnold. They were prepared to be thrown out of his office, but Hap Arnold was delighted with the imaginative approach.[a]

John Alison recalled something else that helped refine the concept:

The British called us the First Air Commando Force. We called ourselves the First Air Commando Group. Hap Arnold gave us the name. He said, "We're going to be an air commando group." Nobody defined what an air commando was, but the term helped Cochran and Alison understand their role and how their project should be structured. Their plan included a list of the aircraft they believed would be needed. Within a month they had commitments for most of their "air armada."

Lining Up the Aircraft

The armada included a diverse array of aircraft, including the pioneering early versions of the Sikorsky line of helicopters:

- A squadron of 13 C-47 transports[b] and, in Alison's words, "some of the best C-47 pilots in the Air Force."
- A dozen smaller transports, the UC-64 Noorduyn Norseman, a rugged Canadian single-engine bush plane, a favorite of pilots operating in Canada's north and in the Arctic.
- 100 Stinson L-1 and L-5 liaison aircraft modified with addition of litters to evacuate casualties.[c]
- A squadron of 30 P-51As[d] for close support.
- 13 B-25 bombers, specially equipped to provide close air support as well, which according to Alison, "we picked up when we got to India,"[e]
- 100 CG-4A Waco Hadrian gliders that carried 13 troops, (50 more CG-4As were added later).
- 25 TG-5 Aeronca gliders, which were smaller than the CG-4As.
- 6 Sikorsky YR-4 helicopters.

The First Air Commando included 30 US P-51A aircraft. Photograph by Robert T. Smith, courtesy Brad Smith

According to Alison, getting the aircraft was not all that difficult:

We had a secret weapon: wrote up our memorandum, signed it General Barney Giles. Giles allocated resources for Arnold. Nobody questioned us; Arnold left us on our own. His approach was: "Damn the paperwork, get out there and fight!" That essentially was our orders. And that's pretty clear. We had

before Quadrant, but they give no clear reference to specific events. However, Cochran's later revelation in Delhi of his and Alison's scheme, just as an entry into Burma was about to be canceled makes clear that not even Mountbatten knew the Americans were prepared to fly Wingate and his Chindits into Burma by air.

a. R.T. Smith, former AVG pilot who at the time was being courted to command the Air Commando Fighter unit by Air Commando executive officer Avrid Olson, his CO in the AVG. Smith later took command of the Commando bombers. "Back to Burma," an unpublished paper by Smith.

b. The C-47 Skytrain—"Dakota" to the British—carried big loads over long distances and could be operated from unimproved strips; it could also tow military gliders. The number was supplemented by in-theater C-47s when the operation began.

c. The L-1 Vigilant, which could evacuate two casualties at a time, was preferred, but only about 20 were available. The remainder were Stinson L-5 Sentinels, which carried only a single litter.

d. Project 9 had originally requested P-38s and then P-47s, but they were committed to Europe. "We were offered the P-51As, which did not perform well at high altitudes, but were great at the low altitudes we used them in Burma."

e. "At the Quadrant Conference, the RAF had agreed to supply the bomber requirement." Van Wagner, *Any Time, Any Place,* 25. In January 1944 it became apparent that the RAF would not be able to provide bombers to support Wingate, Alison appealed to Washington. Twelve B-25H Mitchell medium bombers were diverted from elsewhere in the theater and arrived in early February.

our gliders, and we asked for helicopters. What do you want to do with these things? We can't tell you.

Getting the helicopters was not easy. "Few people had even seen one," recalled Alison. Cochran flew to Dayton to look at them, said he needed six, and was told he couldn't have any. In the end it took a "conference," where Alison had to convince a panel of generals that the helicopters were a "must," when no one really knew much about how helicopters could be used. Alison got his six helicopters. Another priority was first-rate communications gear: "I knew we would have to talk to each other all the time, and good commo gear was thin, [in India] at the tail end of the supply line."[a]

On the all-important question of personnel, Arnold made it easy by granting them carte blanche to recruit almost anyone they wanted. Given their service in the pre-war Army Air Corps, Alison and Cochran knew a great number of competent and experienced airmen—who knew others.

A Meeting in Delhi

Mid-November 1943

The Air Commando was brought together at Seymour Johnson Field in North Carolina, and in early November, Cochran headed off for India, where "nobody [among the British] realized what kind of force we had and what we were doing . . . . We had not even got into their minds, let alone their plans"[26] In Delhi, Cochran found Wingate in the hospital, recovering from a serious bout of typhus and convinced that his planned LRP operation was about to be canceled. Cochran joined a meeting with the SEAC British High Command and American commanders Stilwell, Chennault, and Maj. Gen. George E. Stratemeyer. Alison recalled:

As Wingate's operation was discussed, Phil quickly found out how controversial Wingate was: The British Army didn't want him to succeed. They argued that his planned operation was too close to the rainy season: There wasn't time enough for Wingate to get into Burma; so they would just cancel it. Then Phil spoke up: "You don't need to cancel it. We're going to move Wingate in by air. Instead of six weeks to get him into his fighting area, we'll have him there in one day."

That caused surprise, and a lot of questions.

Cochran came prepared. He and Wingate had drawn a plan in Wingate's hospital room. It was "the plan for an air invasion, the seizing of a jungle clearing by glider, the establishment of a Wingate base in northern Burma." The fact was, "the new Wingate plan made no demand for [scarce, in-theater] air transport. It required nothing of anybody. The verdict was "go ahead." Mountbatten turned to Cochran: "Son, you're the first breath of fresh air I've seen in this theatre,"[28] he famously said. "So then," John Alison recalled, "We had to do it."

The Stronghold

The Stronghold is a machan overlooking a kid tied up to entice the Japanese tiger . . . . The Stronghold is an orbit round which the columns of the Brigade circulate.

Wingate's above words describe his vision of the stronghold, the idea central to his evolving LRP concept: "It is a hunter's blind, overlooking a hobbled, tasty young goat, set out as bait to lure the tiger into range of the hunter's gun." It was the Air Commando that would make this picture real.

It was again Fergusson with whom Wingate had shared his early thinking. "I had known the [stronghold] idea when it first burgeoned in Wingate's mind, but in nothing like the clarity in which it now blazed from his triumphant paper," the final version in which Wingate set down his ideas in January 1944:[29]

The ideal situation for a Stronghold is the center of a circle of 30 miles radius of closely wooded and very broken country, only passable to pack transport owing to great natural obstacles, and capable only of slow improvement. This center should ideally consist of a level upland with a cleared strip for Dakotas, a separate supply-dropping area, taxiways to the Stronghold, a neighboring friendly village or two, and an inexhaustible and uncontaminated water supply within the Stronghold."[30]

Here, Fergusson found ideas that were not new but had not been expressed before:

a. "The RAF 1082/83 radio [used in LONGCLOTH] weighed 240 pounds and needed three mules to carry it." Latimer, *Burma: Forgotten War.* It could not be used to communicate between the columns, but only with the base station in India, which in turn relayed messages between columns.

> *Finally* [the stronghold] *must invite attack by the enemy . . . so that one could smite him as he approached and as he deployed. In addition to the garrison, we were to have floater columns, hanging around the approaches, gathering intelligence, watching for the enemy, and buffeting him as he struggled through the jungle toward* [his] *objectives.*[31]

Viscount Slim had inspired the inclusion of "floater columns" while reviewing the evolving stronghold concept. "I told him [Wingate] to get [General] Scoones's ideas on the floater model of defense as practiced in 4 Corps, by which each garrison had a satellite mobile column to operate against the rear of any enemy attacking formation."[a] Wingate must have seen the value of the floater columns immediately and made the idea an essential part of his "stronghold concept." Calvert writes that "most important" was to maintain an "external" reserve in the vicinity. "This 'floater' company or column was insisted upon by Wingate and proved again and again its usefulness." The floaters patrolled outside the stronghold, won over the local population, formed local levies, and collected intelligence.[32]

The State of British Intelligence in Burma

> *We had practically no useful or reliable information of enemy strength, movements or intentions.*[33]

It would only get worse. The British administration was collapsing, and the Burmese who helped run it were melting away. There was no Burmese intelligence organization. There were no Japanese prisoners to interrogate. Slim would write, "Our only source of information was identification of enemy units by their dead and documents found on them."[b] Air reconnaissance, given "the nature of country," was essentially useless; results were "always negative and therefore unreliable."[34] The Japanese troops avoided roads and stayed under the jungle canopy.

Slim improvised, started an effort to recruit Burmans employed by British firms cutting timber, which eventually led to organization of the "Burma Intelligence Corps," which employed indigenous Burmese, Anglo-Burmans, Karen, and Burma-born Gurkhas to support British military units. They served as guides for units inside Burma, dealt with the local inhabitants, and in the process collected information.

Wingate's Special Force on both expeditions benefited from having 2nd Battalion, The Burma Rifles attached to the force, a platoon deployed with each column. The 2nd Burma Rifles were Kachin, Karen, and Chin, led by British officers. They slipped into villages, disguised themselves as locals, and thereby monitored closely Japanese movements in an area. Wingate wrote of them as "an ideal soldier for aggressive reconnaissance."[35] Fergusson wrote: "Good information is the best protection; and that we had in full from our trusty Burma Rifles."[c, 36] Late in the second expedition, the Chindits received intelligence support from the OSS as they moved north into OSS Detachment 101's operational area, but they depended largely on their "trusty Burma Rifles." On Wingate's second expedition in 1944, the Chindits benefited from the aerial reconnaissance provided by the aircraft of the Air Commando, although the difficulties caused by dense jungle remained.

Theory into Practice

Things were moving fast. By mid-November, elements of the Air Commando were arriving in India. "Equal to a USAAF wing, carrying a normal complement of 2,000 men. . . . Project 9 personnel . . . were kept lean: 87 officers and 436 enlisted men."[37] Two airfields in Assam were selected, Lalaghat for transports and gliders, and Hailakandi for fighters and light planes. The Air Commando started conducting exercises with Chindit Special Force. Soon all the elements of the LRP concept were brought together; it was time to put theory into practice.

The glider insertion code-named Operation THURSDAY, of the Chindits into three strongholds (Picca-

a. Lt. Gen. Geoffry Scoones, commander of the Central Front. "Scoones must have been a little amused to find this appear as a new Wingate method of defense." Slim, *Defeat into Victory,* 220.

b. "Exploitation of even this source was limited because in the whole corps there was only one officer who could speak and read Japanese reasonably well." Slim, *Defeat into Victory,* 28.

c. "John [Fraser, officer commanding the detachment of the Burma Rifles with No. 5 Column] and Bill [Smythies] sent their scouts far and wide, into the very camps of the enemy, whence they brought back tidbits of information to surprise and confound the experts. . . . Faithfully and well those men worked for us, giving the lie to those who despise native sources of information." Fergusson,*Beyond the Chindwin,* 89.

dilly, Broadway, and Chowringhee), would coincide with a push into north Burma from China's bordering Yunnan Province by a Chinese-American force led by General Stilwell.[a] Wingate's "Special Force" was much bigger than the previous year. Instead of a single Chindit Brigade, he had three. Two would be flown in, and Fergusson's 16 Brigade would march in to a stronghold that would be named Aberdeen. "Wingate's main job was to cut the lines of communication of the Japanese facing Stilwell on the Salween River in the East."[38]

Essentially, gliders would move a strong initial force into the central Burma where the three strongholds would be established and airstrips built that would allow the remainder of the force to be airlifted in by C-47 transports. With their strongholds in place, Chindit columns would range out to cut Japanese supply and communications lines, while the Air Commando stood ready to support the mobile columns with air drops and evacuations and provide reconnaissance and firepower.

Not a Certainty of Disaster

5 March 1944

> *Men swarmed about the aircraft, loading them, laying out tow ropes, leading mules, humping packs, and moving endlessly in dusty columns, for all the world like busy ants round captive moths.*[39]

The operation was to begin on Sunday, 5 March 1943, the date chosen because there would be a full moon to provide some visibility for the glider pilots. A number of SEAC's most senior officers had come to Lalaghat to watch the take-offs, among them Slim, Air Marshal Sir John Baldwin, and Stratemeyer.[b] They stood by the airstrip with Wingate and Cochran watching the C-47s taxiing into position, when a jeep suddenly raced up. Slim wrote, "A couple of American airmen jumped out and confronted us with an air photograph, still wet from the developing tent."[c]

Wingate's Chindits waiting to board transports or gliders for the movement from India to Stronghold Broadway in Burma. Photo © *Chronicle*/Alamy Stock Photos

To prevent alerting the Japanese, Wingate had banned all reconnaissance flights in the vicinity of the landing sites for the previous week. Cochran grew concerned and earlier that day decided to ignore the order and sent a B-25 to photograph all three sites. "It was a picture of Piccadilly landing ground, taken two hours previously. It showed almost the whole level space, on which the gliders were to land that night, obstructed by great tree-trunks. It would be impossible to put down even one glider safely. . . . We looked at one another in dismay."[40]

Wingate's initial reaction was that the whole plan must have been betrayed—probably by the Chinese. Slim asked if the other two landing sites had been photographed. They had been, and they were clear of obstructions. Slim drew Wingate aside. The Chinese would have no knowledge of the actual landing sites—or of the THURSDAY operation itself. It was not likely that the Japanese were waiting in the jungle. Wingate "looked straight at me," Slim recalled. "'The responsibility is yours,' he said. I knew it was."[41]

Slim also knew that if the operation was postponed or canceled, it would have a great effect on Stilwell's plan to push into northern Burma and the whole Burma campaign would be in jeopardy. Slim did not believe the obstruction of Piccadilly

a. As a result of Quadrant, two American LRP units were trained by Wingate (commonly known as Galahad Force or Merrill's Marauders). Originally intended to augment the Chindits, they were later relinquished to Stilwell, who was determined that the only US ground troops in the theater would not serve under the British.

b. "Mountbatten was not present due to a painful eye infection."Bierman and Smith, *Fire in the Night*, 348

c. "For some days previously our diversionary air attacks had been almost continuous on the enemy's airfields and communications centers to keep his air force occupied." Slim, *Defeat into Victory,* 258.

was evidence that the Japanese had learned of the operation.[a] "There was a risk," Slim wrote, "a grave risk, but not a certainty of disaster. The operation would go on."[42]

Wingate turned to the changes that now needed to be made: The fly-in would go as planned, "with the exception that the force for Piccadilly [under Calvert] would go to Broadway." (The landing at Chowringhee would take place the next evening.) Cochran gathered the pilots, and Slim watched, curious how he would handle these last-minute changes that could be very disconcerting to the pilots. "Cochran sprang on to the bonnet of a jeep. 'Say, fellers,' he announced, 'we've got a better place to go.'"[43] The photograph delayed the operation all of 72 minutes.[44]

On Broadway

John Alison was in the pilot seat of one of the lead gliders. "Phil and I felt the same way. If you command a unit, you lead it. I told Phil that I would fly a glider into Broadway. He would have to mind the store and hold Wingate's hand—which he was very good at."

The first eight gliders carried the assault teams. Alison tried to put down near a wooded salient that stuck out into the field and commanded the entire landing area. If the Japanese were waiting, their machine guns would be clustered there. "We hit the ground, traveled off through the weeds, knocking down little trees, stopped right at the salient. Lt. Col. Mike Scott, Calvert's deputy who led the assault force went into the woods. After a while he reappeared. 'It's all clear,' he said.'" There were no Japanese waiting.

> *Around us, gliders are coming in—one right after another. You couldn't see them in the night. You heard them, whistling down the wind, coming too fast. . . . You don't know where it's going . . . . You side-step, like you're in a bull-fight. The wing passes right over your head. . . . One young pilot lands and yells, "Hey man, I made it!" The next glider crashes into him and he's dead. A glider made a terrible noise as it crashed through the trees, like a thousand kettle drums. We knew we were losing a lot of men.*

The aerial photographs had not shown ditches that ran across the landing area and were causing much of the chaos. The gliders had to be stopped. "We had two code words: For 'success' we would broadcast 'Pork Sausage'; for disaster on the ground the word was 'Soya Link,' the meat substitute we all loathed."[45] Alison found a glider with an intact radio; Calvert broadcast: "Soya Link." The gliders stopped coming in. Alison and Calvert fell asleep where they were.

They would not rest long. Calvert wrote: "I was startled to hear the roar of a powerful engine coming . . . from the jungle . . . . Alison joined me and we stared in amazement as a bulldozer slowly emerged from between the trees with a US Army engineer at the controls."[46] The bulldozer and its driver had survived the crash of the last glider to land. Alison stepped up to him and the following conversation ensued:

"Can you make an airstrip here?" Alison asked.

"Yes, sir!" the engineer responded.

"How long will it take?"

"If I have it done by this afternoon, will that be alright?"

"God bless you!"

On the strength of that, Calvert sent out "Pork Sausage," and it was "received with joy at Lalaghat."[47]

By Slim's account, of 80 ready gliders, 61 took off and 35 landed at Broadway. "Many gliders and a few aircraft force landed, some in our territory, nine in Japanese."[48] About 30 were killed on landing at Broadway, and the same number injured. Later, Calvert noted: "On roll call I found I had 350 all ranks under command and ready to fight."[49] Alison would remember,

> *they made that airstrip. It wasn't very long—less than 3,000 feet. And then I told Phil to send me airplanes. And they came in . . . one right after the other.*

In the middle of the first day 12 light planes arrived to fly the wounded back. An hour after dark, Brigadier General Old[b] landed with the first load. That night, 63 more Dako-

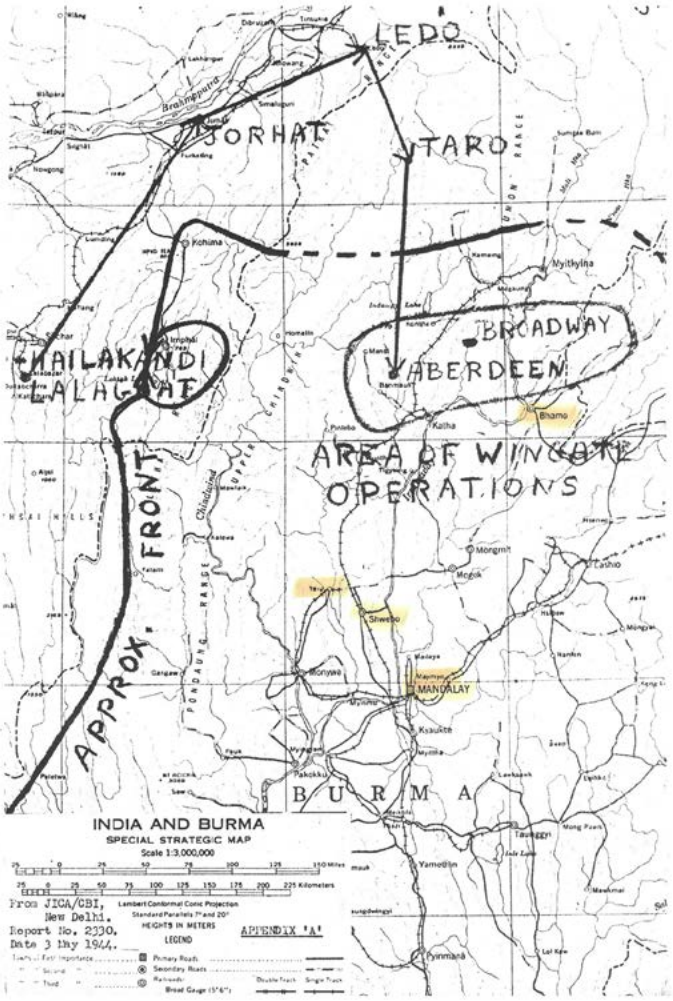
a. "Hindsight later attributed the condition to Burmese teakwood farmers." Van Wagner, *Any Place, Any Time, Any Where*, 49. "As was found at Broadway, teak logs were dragged into clearings by work elephants during the logging season. Some had been left behind at Broadway; those at Piccadilly probably had not yet been collected." See also Bierman and Smith, *Fire in the Night,* 355.

b. Commander of the joint American and British Troop Carrier Command.

tas landed. From then on, for the next few days, 100 Dakotas landed each night. General Slim wrote: "Between the 5th and 10th March, one hundred gliders and almost 600 Dakota sorties flew in 9,000 troops and 1,100 animals. In addition, with the unit that walked in to Stronghold Aberdeen, Fergusson's 16 Brigade, Wingate had nearly 12,000 troops well-placed, as he put it, "in the enemy's guts."[50] That was in addition to the "masses of equipment, and anti-aircraft and field batteries all established behind the enemy's lines."

On 12 March, the RAF flew six Spitfires to Broadway, to base them there,[a] a move not coordinated with Cochran. They attracted the Japanese; the next day 30 Japanese fighter aircraft attacked Broadway. The Spitfires took them on and destroyed four but were then withdrawn. The Air Commando fighters and bombers, wisely based in India, were already ranging over wide areas of Burma, destroying supply and communications lines and now starting to support ground assaults by the Chindit columns.

The light plane force distinguished itself in evacuating wounded and supporting moving Chindit columns with supply drops and target-spotting. The fighter pilots wanted air battles instead of ground targets and got both. They destroyed 50 enemy aircraft by the end of March.[51] The helicopters, for the first time employed in a combat area, made 18 evacuations, some not possible by other means. Calvert's column headed southwest out of Broadway and, after a fierce fight to take the



Above map may have been used by Air Commando helicopter pilot Carter Harmon in evacuation operations near Strongholds Aberdeen and Broadway in April 1944. Below are Harmon, his copilot (both standing), and ground crew. Harman is credited with performing the first-ever helicopter combat evacuations, from behind enemy lines in Burma. Map and photo courtesy of First Air Commando Association via LRA.

a. "The first time an operational airfield had been established behind the enemy." Slim, *Defeat into Victory,* 266.

area, established a stronghold among a collection of small hills that became known as "White City," for all the supply parachutes caught in the trees. From there the Chindits could control the railway and the roads, and Japanese movement to the north.

Wingate's long-range penetration concept was on its way to total success. On 23 and 24 March, Wingate visited his stronghold commanders at Broadway, White City, and Aberdeen and expressed pleasure with what had been achieved. He showed Calvert messages of congratulations he had received from Churchill and Roosevelt. He returned to Broadway in one of the light aircraft, and got aboard a B-25 to fly back to India.

The Great Concept Dimmed

24 March – 26 June 1944

> *Then Wingate was gone: "Wingate's aircraft plunged down into the earth and burst into flames with everyone aboard killed instantly."*[52]

The cause was uncertain. Slim cites the "most probable explanation. . . one of those local storms of extreme turbulence so frequent in the area."[53] Alison flew over the crash site and saw that no one could have survived. "Throughout the force that [Wingate] had commanded and formed, the shock was felt with amazement and pain of sudden personal grief . . . a great adventure had come to an end."[54]

The Chindits were meeting a lot of Japanese opposition now, and Operation THURSDAY was entering a difficult stage:

> *It was vital that his leadership should fall on someone in sympathy with his* [Wingate's] *ideas . . . . Slim chose Brigadier W.D. Lentaigne, the commander of 111 Brigade, who regarded Wingate as an upstart, held his theories in contempt, and thought them unsound and unproven. . . . Under his command, the momentum slowed, and the great concept dimmed. In the end, the Chindits were villainously misused, and he was powerless to prevent it."*[55]

Harsh words that reflected reality. In Slim's view, Lentaigne was "the most balanced and experienced of Wingate's commanders."[56] Mike Calvert, widely presumed to be Wingate's choice as his successor, provides perspective:

> *The task of following in Wingate's footsteps was an unenviable one. The men who had opposed Orde's ideas but who had been unable to shift him because of his powerful friends, now had a new and comparatively unprotected target. The knives that had been reluctantly put away were taken out again and lovingly sharpened.*[57]

The Chindits became more involved with Stilwell's campaign in north Burma. On 6 May 1944, they were placed under Stilwell's command, to support his siege of Myitkyina. "They lost their long-range penetration role and were deployed in battle as regular infantry formations, but without armoured or artillery support,"[58] while the monsoon grounded the attack aircraft of the Air Commando. On 26 June, Mike Calvert's 77 Brigade took Mogaung, which the Japanese fiercely defended, after a fight of well over a month. It was the last "special force" action. The men were weary and sick, but Stilwell refused to let them be relieved until mid-August, when the Chindit brigades were withdrawn from Burma and later disbanded.

On 28 March, General Arnold called Colonel Alison home to help "establish more air commando units." A second message requested that en route to the United States . . . "he brief General Dwight D. Eisenhower . . . on Operation THURSDAY."[59] Cochran was later sent to Europe, to join "the first Allied airborne army," but the war was winding down, and plans for new activities were soon abandoned.[60]

The Legacy

By bringing the Air Commando into his long-range penetration concept, Wingate took the age-old ways of fighting on the ground into the modern era of airplanes and wireless communication, thereby multiplying the effectiveness of a "Special Force" and the ways in which it could be used.

The 1st Air Commando Group itself achieved a number of firsts on its initial operation. It was the first "composite" air unit of specialized, but mixed aircraft types. It was the first air unit to be given a high degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency that enabled it to be highly responsive and flexible. It was the first air unit designed to support a force on the ground and to work out the ways that would be done. Operation THURSDAY was the first invasion of enemy-controlled territory by air, and it was the first employment of

a sizable force of light aircraft in a combat situation—and the first use of helicopters in war.

The influence of Wingate's thinking, and of Cochran's and Alison's, would become very evident after WWII ended and the world moved into the Cold War. The use of air commando units supporting forces on the ground was seen with increasing frequency—in Tibet, during the Korean War, and in the responses to Soviet-inspired and supported insurgencies in the Third World, which for the United States culminated in Laos and Vietnam.

Today, the reflections of Wingate's Special Force can be seen in counterterrorism operations in the Middle East and elsewhere. The instruments may have changed, from the P-51 and B-25 to the Cobra and Spooky, and then to the Warthog and the Reaper, as the stronghold became a fire base and an outpost, all reflections of Wingate and the 1st Air Commando Group—and the concept of long-range penetration—which has endured.

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Endnotes

1. Ronald H. Carpenter, *Rhetoric in Martial Deliberations and Decision Making* (University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 175. Quoting from Churchill's *The Second World War*, vol. 5.
2. Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942–1945* (Cooper Square Press, 2000), 162.
3. Bernard Fergusson, *Beyond the Chindwin* (Leo Cooper, 1995), 241.
4. Michael Calvert, *Fighting Mad: One Man's Guerrilla War* (Airlife Publishing Ltd, 1996), 130. Major Calvert was commander of the brigade's No. 3 Column.
5. Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War* (Phoenix Press, 1984), 146.
6. Jon Latimer, *Burma: The Forgotten War* (John Murray, 2005), 167.
7. John Bierman and Colin Smith, *Fire in the Night* (Random House, 1999), 271. Mike Calvert notes that Wingate chose the Chindit name while 77 Brigade was training at Saugor, India, "though the name was not really established until after the 1943 campaign." *Fighting Mad*, 116.
8. Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 163.
9. Trevor Royle, *Orde Wingate: A Man of Genius* (Frontline Books, 2010), 256.
10. Latimer, *Burma, The Forgotten War*, 168.
11. Ibid.
12. Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 162.
13. Carpenter, *Rhetoric in Martial Deliberations and Decision Making*, 180.
14. Royle, *Orde Wingate*, 263.
15. Fergusson, *Beyond the Chindwin*, 21.
16. Ibid.
17. Carpenter, *Rhetoric in Martial Deliberations and Decision Making*, 177.
18. Royle, *Orde Wingate*, 262.
19. Ibid., 264.
20. Carpenter, *Rhetoric in Martial Deliberations and Decision Making*, 181.
21. Ibid., 180, 182.
22. P. D. Van Wagner, *Any Place, Any Time, Any Where* (Schiffer, 1998), 19–20.
23. Except where otherwise noted, the recollections quoted in the following pages are from the author's interviews with USAF Maj. Gen. John R. Alison, a founder and co-commander of 1st Air Commando Group, who is often cited as the father of Air Force Special Operations. A series of six interviews were done in Washington, DC, in the summer of 2001, on Alison's Air Force career, with a focus on his role with the 23rd Fighter Group and the planning and execution of 1st Air Commando Group and Operation THURSDAY.
24. Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 217.
25. Bierman and Smith, *Fire in the Night*, 325.
26. Lowell Thomas, *Back to Mandalay* (Greystone Press, 1951), 77.
27. Ibid., 117. From Thomas's interview with Cochran.
28. Ibid., 118.
29. Fergusson, *Wild Green Earth*, 73.
30. Bierman and Smith, *Fire in the Night*, 341.
31. Fergusson, *The Battle for Burma: Wild Green Earth* (Collins, 1946), 74.

32. Michael Calvert, *Chindits-Long Range Penetration* (Ballentine Books Inc., 1973), 77.
33. Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 29. Field Marshal Slim's evaluation of the situation soon after he arrived in Burma in March 1942.
34. Ibid.
35. From Wingate's report on the first Special Force Operation, Webpage, 2nd Burma Rifles.(http://www.rothwell.force9.co.uk/burmaweb/2ndburma.htm)
36. Fergusson, *Wild Green Earth*, 166.
37. Van Wagner, *Any Place, Any Time, Any Where*, 28.
38. Calvert, *Chindits*, 21.
39. Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 258. Slim on his arrival at Halakandi airstrip, where gliders were being readied on 5 March 1944.
40. Ibid., 260.
41. Ibid., 261.
42. Ibid., 264.
43. Ibid., 263.
44. Van Wagner, *Any Place, Any Time, Any Where,* 47.
45. Calvert, *Fighting Mad*, 68.
46. Ibid., 145.
47. Ibid., 146.
48. Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 264.
49. Calvert, *Chindits*, 28–29.
50. Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 265.
51. Van Wagner, *Any Place, Any Time, Any Where*, 68.
52. Christopher Sykes, *Orde Wingate (*Collins, 1959), 534.
53. Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 269.
54. Sykes, *Orde Wingate*, 535.
55. Allen, *Burma: The Longest War*, 348.
56. Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 289.
57. Calvert, *Fighting Mad*, 161–62.
58. Royle, *Orde Wingate*, 318.
59. Van Wagner, *Any Place, Any Time, Any Where*, 77.
60. Thomas, *Back to Mandalay*, 312.

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The suthor: *Bob Bergin* is a former Foreign Service officer. He is now an independent researcher and writer, focused on history in Southeast Asia and the history of air power. He has contributed several articles to *Studies*.