

# PATHFINDER



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## CHINDITS - A REAPPRAISAL

The 1942-45 campaign in Burma was a complex amalgam of political priorities between the Allied participants: Great Britain, the United States of America, China and India. It is also a striking illustration of the way in which all military campaigns since the 20<sup>th</sup> century have become critically dependent upon air power. Exemplifying this point are two operations undertaken in February 1943 and March 1944, which bear critical analysis. Both were carried out by troops trained in jungle raiding and guerilla tactics known as Chindits—Chindit being a corruption of *Chinthe*, the Burmese name for the griffon-like lions that protect Buddhist temples—under their charismatic commander, Charles Orde Wingate.

The concept behind both operations was simple: the insertion of a mobile force, supplied by air, behind enemy lines to disrupt communications. Described as Long Range Penetration (LRP), it was a type of warfare devised in the Western Desert. To implement his idea in Burma, in 1943 Brigadier Orde Wingate took 3000 troops of 77 Brigade overland from the Imphal Plain to operate between the Chindwin and Irrawaddy rivers. The force was organised in various columns with the object of cutting the Japanese north-south railway between Myitkyina and Indaw. The railway was demolished near Bonchaung on 6 March, and the columns operated behind enemy lines until May. But the cost in personnel was high. Of the 2182 survivors, 600 never recovered to be fit for further active duty.

For political, publicity and morale reasons, the efforts of 77 Brigade found the approval of the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief of South-East Asia Command, Lord Louis Mountbatten. As a consequence of this patronage, and decisions taken at the *Quadrant* conference held in Quebec, Canada, in August 1943, Wingate was promoted to major general and his command expanded to a 23,000-strong formation called Special Force.

Wingate began planning Operation *Thursday*, involving a refinement of his original concept.

On 5 March 1944 six columns from Nos 3, 23 and 77 Brigades were inserted by air beyond the Chindwin River. A seventh column, Brigadier Bernard Fergusson's 16 Brigade, marched overland from Ledo. Six 'strongholds' (codenamed Broadway, Piccadilly, Blackpool, Aberdeen, White City and Chowringhee) were to be seized and developed as secure bases from which the columns could launch attacks aimed at severing the enemy lines of communication and neutralising focal points between Myitkyina and Mandalay. It was imperative that an airfield capable of operating Dakota aircraft was constructed within each secure perimeter.



*Chindits crossing the Chindwin River*

Statistics over the first six days of the 1944 fly-in indicate Special Force's dependence on air support: 579 Dakota and 74 glider sorties delivered 9052 troops, 1359 animals and 254 tonnes of supplies and equipment. Ironically, Wingate was himself killed when the aircraft carrying him crashed near Imphal during a storm on 14 March. The Special Force operation he had set in train continued under Brigadier Walter Lentaigne.

In planning for *Thursday*, Wingate had been aware that success depended on Allied aerial supremacy, and that Special Force would be reliant on No 1 Air Commando—a specialised USAAF unit that had been established under the command of Colonel Phil Cochrane to support his operations. Each column had with it a RAF Section, comprising an officer and two

radio sergeants. The role of the officers (many of whom were Australian) was to arrange for air supply, and act as forward air controllers for Cochrane's Mustang and Mitchell aircraft that provided the Special Force with close air support. Another important role involved the use of light aircraft for casualty evacuation, and it was during this campaign that a helicopter (the force had ten Sikorskis) was first used for such work.

Despite Wingate's faith, in many respects he expected too much from air power—especially given the other factors (weather, unreliable communications) involved. Believing that aircraft could deal with any targets that needed to be engaged, he sent in his columns without organic artillery (apart from four 25-pounder guns deployed for the defence of each stronghold). Wingate is quoted as telling his units: 'The planes are our artillery. They will bomb and destroy the targets you produce.'

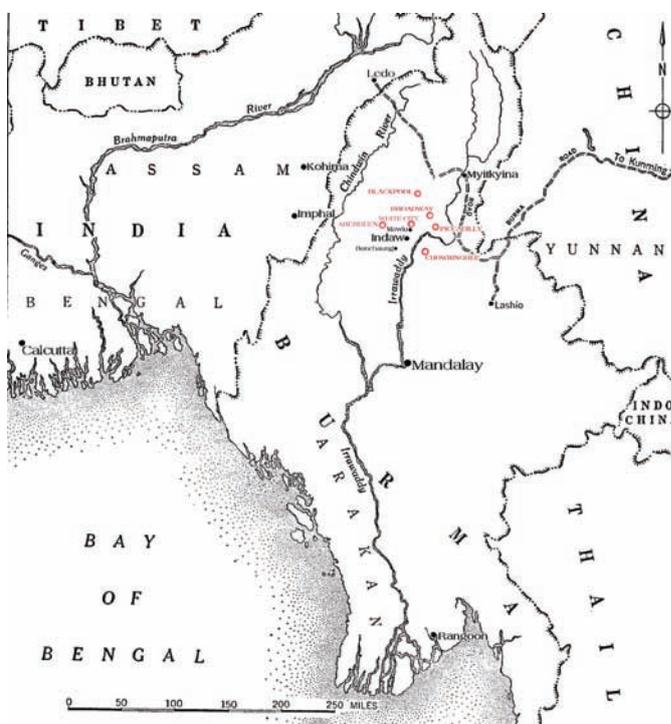
While there is no doubt that most targets could usually be successfully hit from the air, unfortunately this did not always prove to be the case. The classic example was in late April when a column cut the Burma Road at Nalong, 45 miles south of Myitkyina, trapping an accumulation of more than 300 enemy vehicles. Pleas for a strike against this massive target—perhaps the outstanding prize thrown up during the whole operation—went unanswered, and the ground troops lacked the firepower to destroy it themselves.

While *Thursday* was undoubtedly a military innovation, questions remain as to whether it was necessary or worthwhile. The Special Force insertion coincided with the Japanese Assam offensive, but there is little evidence that the presence of Wingate's force diverted any effort from the enemy attacks on Imphal and Kohima. It took Special Force 11 days to cut the rail and road communications south of Myitkyina, after Brigadier Mike Calvert's 77 Brigade destroyed a Japanese garrison at Mawlu and established the stronghold known as White City.

It might even be argued that Special Force operations were a misuse of air resources. The 1944 campaign was one in which an Army formation was given strategic

mobility, but suffered from tactical immobility. The bulk of Special Force was inserted 200 miles behind enemy lines in a matter of hours. Once the strongholds had been consolidated, however, the tactical deployment of the men was restricted by a reliance on mules and the physical fitness and sustainability of the troops. To provide essential sustenance, four Dakota squadrons had to be diverted from the Assam fighting to supply the logistic requirements of Special Force.

On balance, perhaps it would have been more efficient and economical to send only small parties behind enemy lines to conduct long-range reconnaissance, leaving it to Cochrane's Mustangs and Mitchells to destroy targets that these identified. It is argued that the dislocation of enemy lines of communication in Burma could have been achieved just as well by intelligent targeting by the Allied air forces as it was by special operations.



*The challenge for Air Power is to maintain its relevance in a changing world.*

- ACM Sir Brian Burrige, 2003



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