

Burma and surrounding countries



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## **Prologue**

### **Burma, February 1942**

The Sapper Company had worked all through the hot Burmese day preparing the three centre spans of the Sittang Railway Bridge for demolition. If the bridge was not destroyed, two Japanese divisions could cross over to the west and attack Rangoon, precipitating the fall of Burma and placing India in a grave position.

More than 4,000 British, Gurkha, Indian and Burmese troops of 17 Indian Division were still on the east bank of the river, held in a fierce battle with the Japanese, and nothing seemed to be going right for Major General Jackie Smyth, VC. Each crack of a rifle, each staccato burst from a machine-gun, was like a rivet being driven into his body. Yet, he had told himself many times before that it could have been so different; though, he now knew with absolute finality that there was nothing more he could do except sit it out.

As darkness fell, Smyth at last drove back to his Ops Room at the village of Abya some 5 miles west of the bridge. He felt faint from lack of food, weary in mind and body. A body which he had kept so fit throughout his career and which now threatened to let him down at the most vital moment of his life. A bite to eat and a few hours sleep were needed to revitalise him, to help him fight the pain, but it seemed as though he had hardly closed his eyes when he was awakened by Brigadier "Punch" Cowan, his chief of staff, to take an urgent telephone call from Brigadier Hugh-Jones, the bridgehead commander. As the general was handed the receiver he sensed that his worst fears were about to be realised; he had, after all, stressed upon Hugh-Jones that on no account must the enemy seize the bridge intact.

Hugh-Jones reported, 'I have had a word with Captain Orgill of the Field Company and if the bridge is not blown now, he cannot guarantee to do so in the morning.'

‘Why is that?’ Smyth asked.

Hugh-Jones explained that there was not enough fuse and electric cable, so the firing point had to be located on the bridge itself and some distance from the west bank. ‘The enemy has now established a machine-gun post on the railway cutting. We tried to dislodge it but failed. In the daylight, the sappers will be dangerously exposed as they touch off the fuses.

‘I have spoken to the commanders of the bridgehead troops and they are both of the same mind, sir. Our bridgehead is holding off the enemy at the moment, but a more concentrated attack in the morning is inevitable.’

Smyth lowered the receiver, holding it against his chest. The bridge must not fall into Japanese hands. Yet, some two thirds of his division was still on the wrong side of the river. Wireless communications had broken down, but obviously his men must be fighting desperately to restrain the enemy, so they could cross the bridge themselves before it was blown.

The only way across for miles, the iron bridge was 500 yards long, of eleven spans, each 150 feet, and recently decked over to take road traffic and marching troops. The river widened below the bridge to 1,000 yards, a formidable obstacle, even to strong swimmers, because of the treacherous current. A considerable number, probably the majority, were non-swimmers and as for boats – only the day before some 300 sampans had been bought by the Royal Engineers from Burmese villagers on both sides of the river and then destroyed to deny their use to the enemy.

The Japanese could have bombed the bridge at any time, but it was much more important to them intact as the shortest route to Rangoon; to find a suitable alternative further north would have meant a long delay. With this in mind, Smyth had hoped to have his complete division across the river and the bridge destroyed well before the enemy reached the area. He could have organised a stout defence on the west bank, supported by 7 Armoured Brigade, which was due to arrive shortly from Rangoon. But because of a clash of opinion with higher command, he now found himself in this hopeless situation, caught with his division split, the enemy attacking fiercely and the bridge still intact.

What a horrible decision to make, Smyth thought. He had gone over the pros and cons many times and he knew that there was really only one decision to reach. But he hesitated, allowing himself another few minutes of deliberation, seeking despairingly for an alternative solution.

Lieut. General Sakurai, commanding the elite *33 Division*, was handed an intercepted radio message which had been transmitted in clear, and at once he realised that the British were pulling back to the Sittang Bridge.

‘We must reach the bridge before the British. Catch them in a scorpion trap!’ He curled his hand like the claws of a scorpion and then snapped the fingers together, closing the hand into a fist. ‘And hold them for the death sting.’

It was The Scorpion Trap, a Japanese manoeuvre established in ancient times. The scorpion, with claws outstretched, reaches to seize its prey from behind so that it can be held and stung to death.

Acting on the general’s immediate orders, *215 Regiment* moved out: around 5,000 ruthless and experienced soldiers advancing at top speed towards the bridge, fired up by hunger for more action and for victory. Meanwhile the rest of *33 Division*, together with *55 Division*, stood by to give the death sting to 17 Indian Division once it was caught in the scorpion trap like some fragile grasshopper.

Across the river, Brigadier J. K. “Jonah” Jones, of 16 Indian Brigade, had that evening set up a defensive position around Mokpalin village, about a mile short of the bridge. A sort of fort in the jungle, where he hoped to hold out overnight and break out from in the morning through the block the enemy had placed between him and the bridge. The perimeter was manned by a mixed bag of units from the division’s three brigades, which had been dispersed in the confusion caused by surprise Japanese ambushes and roadblocks earlier in the day.

One of the units was C Company of 4/15th Gurkha Rifles, commanded by Captain Paul Cooper. Separated from his battalion when it was ambushed, he had led his company to Mokpalin and been allocated a position on the perimeter.

His men dug in, while Paul waited anxiously for what the night might bring. How many more men would he lose? He was 20 years old, an Emergency Commissioned Officer, short of military experience and

*The Scorpion Trap*

propelled into command. But he had brought the survivors of his company some 300 hazardous miles in the past five weeks as 17 Division withdrew towards Rangoon, pressed by the Japanese invasion forces. Now, he was in a trap from which it would be difficult to escape.

Suddenly, the night was rent apart by artillery flashes, the blast from exploding shells reverberating around the village, mortar bombs plunging in from their high trajectory. Fierce machine-gun fire opened up, the tracer threading the darkness with stitches of red, green and white to indicate the various enemy formations. There was also the usual rattle of the cracker guns to try to locate the defenders' machine-gun positions. Then the first line of enemy infantry hit the perimeter.

**Part One**  
**The Hungry River**

## Chapter One

### Journey to War

Lieut. Colonel Lionel Osborne, Commandant of 4th Battalion, the 15th Gurkha Rifles, looked over his officers as they settled down in an assortment of chairs in the officers' mess, where he had called a meeting at short notice.

A tall man in his mid fifties, he was lean, wiry and brown from his long service under an Indian sun. After several years of rising through the various regimental positions, he had at last been given a battalion of his own. A few weeks earlier, the battalion had moved into camp in the centre of Poona Racecourse. Now, the colonel had received exciting new orders.

'Right,' he said abruptly and the officers sat up straight, eager to hear his news, '46 Brigade, which was due to sail for the Middle East, has been diverted to Burma and we are to accompany it and become part of 17 Division under the command of General Smyth.'

A reaction of surprise, expectation, delight and fear crackled like electric sparks under the canvas and the colonel paused to let everyone settle down again.

He had known most of his senior officers before the battalion had been raised because they had held regular commissions. Best of all, he knew his 2 i/c, Arthur Kennedy. They had almost been brought up together in the regiment from their earlier days and their families and children had grown up together. Arthur was a self-made man, but he was not the sort to throw his weight about and because of his understanding manner he was respected by his Gurkhas. He was also respected by the other officers, although he was a silent man, not given to unnecessary conversation. Robin Hutchings, the adjutant, was a younger man, much more intense, a strict disciplinarian, not an easy man to get to know, and he seemed to live for the regiment. Osborne felt he would be better off for more outside interests. Still, he was an excellent administrator and the colonel found his help invaluable.

Of his four company commanders, three were professional soldiers. Martin he knew vaguely and was satisfied with the opinion he had formed. Todd and Sanderson had been transferred from the regimental centre and he had not had an opportunity to really sum them up. But they both came with good reports. The fourth company commander was Davidson: suave, always well turned out, he looked as though he would be more at ease in a cocktail bar than on the parade ground. Normally, Osborne would not have made him a company commander, but there was no one else as senior; although, he had to admit, even Robin could find nothing wrong with his handling of his company.

Osborne was also very short of junior officers. The battalion was a new one and had been taken unawares by the sudden order to join 46 Indian Brigade. Most of the action was in the Middle East, so formations in that war zone had priority. Of the few subalterns he had managed to purloin, two were on courses and one was in hospital. He looked at Hunter, his intelligence officer, almost straight out of officers' training school, which should not be held against him; after all, soon, the army would consist largely of emergency commissioned officers and most of them would do very well. But although Hunter was a presentable, young, intelligent man, he had an obvious inferiority complex and Osborne hoped that enemy action would shake that out of him.

Doc Green, the MO, was just the opposite; impressive, reliable and an excellent doctor, if somewhat eccentric. This left Paul Cooper, whom the colonel sensed was a good officer in the making. Young, dark-haired, pleasant bearing, very tanned, athletic, about 5 foot 10 inches tall; from a distance he would blend in well with his Gurkhas under the probing sights of a Japanese sniper. He also had an advantage over most of the officers, because he could speak Nepali fluently as he had been brought up on a tea garden near Darjeeling in the Himalayas. But he seemed to be rather friendly with Davidson and the colonel hoped he would not be led astray.

With the officers more settled, Osborne continued, 'You will be given details of the movement order shortly, but first, while you are all gathered here, I felt that I should just remind you that we have been concentrating our training with the Germans in mind as the enemy. Now, we will have to switch to a completely different enemy – one who, I might say, in spite of all the misleading intelligence put out to belittle his capabilities, is an enemy to be respected. I spent a few months in Japan before the war as guests of some Japanese military friends. Take it from me, the Japanese soldier is tough, dedicated, utterly ruthless,

often barbarous and fanatically devoted to the Emperor and he believes it is his duty to sacrifice his life for his country.'

Osborne paused for a moment. 'I don't want to sound defeatist,' he continued. 'The Japanese are not supermen but very good warriors, superbly trained and experienced. I know we are a very young battalion, untrained in jungle warfare, and, of course, we are still well below our official establishment in both officers and men. But our Gurkhas have a reputation of courage and I am sure that the battalion will maintain the highest traditions of the regiment. It will be up to us to give the right leadership and I am sure you won't fail me there.'

Paul awoke with a start as Rifleman Gopiram Gurung shook him out of a deep sleep. The Gurkha orderly handed him a mug of life-saving tea and struck a match to light up his first cigarette of the day.

It had been Tony Davidson's idea to have a night out at some club in Poona Cantonment. 'Could be our last chance before we leave for Burma,' he'd said. Paul had not needed much persuasion, but now he sat on the edge of his camp cot in his crumpled uniform, suffering the effects of a monumental hangover. A sip or two of the hot, sweet tea and some drags on the cigarette and he began to feel better. There was a broad grin on Gopiram's face.

Paul said defensively, 'I was not drunk.'

The young orderly's shoulders shook. 'Ho! Ho! Is that why you slept in your uniform, sahib?'

Paul ran a hand over the Gurkha's shaven head. 'Get along you, *badmash*.'

Still grinning at being called a troublemaker, Gopiram poured hot water into a canvas bowl. Paul shaved, took a shower in the ablution tent, changed into a clean uniform and wondered if he could face breakfast. To his surprise, he was able to make a reasonable meal before walking over to C Company's lines.

The men were already on parade and Subedar Tilbir Gurung called them to attention as Paul approached. Returning the salute, Paul stood the men at ease while they awaited the arrival of Captain Mike Martin, C Company Commander.

'What do you think of the news, Subedar Sahib?' Paul asked.

'It is good, sahib. We have been idle too long.' Tilbir was a slim man in his late thirties, but with all his years of service he had little experience of action, apart from a skirmish or two as a young man on India's North-West Frontier. War would give him the chance to win a medal, perhaps, and secure a larger pension. He was a quiet-spoken

man, giving an impression of softness which quite belied the steel which ran through his body. His soft brown eyes could change in an instant to the paralysing glitter of those of a snake, making tough Gurkha NCOs wish the ground would open to devour them and young riflemen wish they were back on their snowy mountains. But he was also fair in his judgements and he was certainly loyal to both Crown and Regiment.

Behind him, the men of C Company, waiting in their three platoons and the headquarters' section, looked smart, but most of them were only just beyond the recruit stage. It was going to be straight into the deep end for them – and me, Paul thought. But they were Gurkhas and that, he knew, made up in courage for whatever they lacked in military skills.

They were a long way from their homeland in the high mountains of Nepal, the small, independent Hindu kingdom tucked into the Himalayas on India's northern borders. A rough, poor country with no roads outside the capital of Kathmandu, just a switchback of paths up and down the hills and across perilous, rickety bridges over mountain streams which became raging torrents in the monsoon. Small hamlets perched on the hilltops and back-breaking fields tumbled into the valleys. A hard country of rugged beauty which had produced a tough people – but a beautiful people – with a great sense of humour, a determination to live and a joy of music and dancing. They were as warm and hospitable as they could be cold and ruthless if the occasion warranted and, above all, loyal to a cause and steadfast to an oath.

Tilbir coughed a warning as Captain Mike Martin approached. Paul admired his company commander, a regular officer in his early thirties, a strict disciplinarian but a fair one, whom the Gurkhas respected because he had learned their language and he understood them. Paul called the company to attention.

After a brief moment, Martin said, 'Fall the men out, please. I want to see the order group in the company tent at once.'

He entered the large tent a few yards away where, presently, Paul joined him, accompanied by the senior members of the company. Sitting behind the trestle table which served as his desk, Martin picked up a pencil and twirled it between his fingers.

'C Company has received orders to be the advance party, the rest of the battalion following in a day or two. We are moving out at 23.30 hours tonight to catch a train at 01.00 for Calcutta, where a ship will take us on to Rangoon. Which, I am afraid, does not give us a lot of time, so let us discuss the quickest and most efficient way to proceed.'

The order group consisted of experienced men and within the hour the meeting had worked out priorities and a general scheme for the journey.

The remainder of the day was a mad rush, organising fatigue parties to help the quartermaster with stores and ammunition, the packing of the men's personal belongings, arrangements for the care of the handful of sick men and transport to Poona Railway Station. Then the RTO had to be telephoned to make certain the company was booked all the way to Calcutta and that feeding arrangements were organised for the long journey across the Indian Continent. Someone also had to check that Calcutta had been advised of their pending arrival and was laying on transport to the docks; goodness knows how many other things had to be tied up before they left. By the time their evening meal was prepared the company was ready.

'I'll see you later in the mess,' Martin said.

Paul took a shower before going to the officers' mess for dinner. As he entered the tent, his friend Tony said, 'You look as though you need a Scotch.' He clicked his fingers at the mess orderly.

'I could certainly do with one. It's been a very hectic day. God knows how we managed to get everything done in time. We are sure to have forgotten something, I suppose.'

At that moment, Osborne came in followed closely by Major Arthur Kennedy. 'Pay attention, please,' the colonel said abruptly. 'I am afraid I have bad news. Mike – Captain Martin – has been injured in a car crash. I believe he is badly hurt and in hospital. We are waiting for further news.' He turned to Paul. 'Please let your subedar know.'

After Paul had left, the colonel said, 'Now, what are we going to do about a replacement?'

'One of the other company commanders will have to take over,' Kennedy suggested.

'Normally, perhaps,' Osborne said. 'But we are short enough of officers as it is without interfering with the other companies. I think Cooper is capable of taking the company to Calcutta. After all, it will only be a few days before the rest of us join him. Meanwhile, we'll have to see if we can raise a replacement from the regimental centre.'

When Paul returned, the colonel came straight to the point. 'Right, Paul, I want you to take over temporary command of C Company. I presume the company is ready?'

'Yes, sir.'

'That's fine.' He turned to the bar to collect his drink and carry on a conversation with Kennedy as though everything was as it should be.

Paul was surprised that the colonel had not given him a lot of advice or told him how much was expected of him. But then, Paul thought, the colonel was not that sort of man. The adjutant, however, was an authoritarian and he took Paul to one side later, quizzing him thoroughly, to make certain he knew what was expected of him.

A few hours later, C Company was ready to move out of camp, the lorries loaded with the stores and kit, the men just waiting for the final order. The colonel eventually gave permission to move out and at the blowing of a whistle, the Gurkhas clambered into the backs of the lorries, chattering and laughing more than fully trained soldiers would have done, but on this occasion the NCOs restrained themselves from enforcing firm discipline. They were going to war, to new places. But how many of them would come back? And how many would be seriously wounded, carrying their scars and their disabilities for life? But that was far from their thoughts.

The drivers started up and the lorries rolled out in convoy past the cheering, laughing men of the other companies. Then the lights of the camp vanished and they were on their way to war.

As the flying boat approached Rangoon, Major General Jackie Smyth felt a growing excitement. At last he was to command a division in the field. But if there was excitement, there was also a touch of anxiety at the similarity between the situation in Burma and at Dunkirk, where he had commanded a brigade.

The events at Dunkirk were still vivid in his mind: the appalling difficulty of retreating from superior forces, continuous attacks from land and air, units widely separated, communications cut and only the miracle at Dunkirk to save them. What miracle would save them at Burma?

A realistic appreciation made it all too clear that with his scratch division, well short of full strength and not trained in jungle warfare, all he could do was try to hold the crack Japanese divisions long enough to allow reinforcements to build up behind him. He had to find some place to make a real stand – there was to be no shambling retreat without coordination. The enemy had to be given a few body blows as well as being held in check. With his long years of service and his experience gained in two world wars, he felt confident of making a good show.

He looked out of the aircraft window, down to where the Bay of Bengal sparkled silver in the sunshine, lapping against the Burmese coastline where the mangroves were almost black against the sand. And

further inland the dense jungle, fissured by countless streams, climbed over hills – the sort of terrain which demanded fitness. But he had always been fit, with no excess weight. A slim man of average height, with a heart-shaped face and growing prematurely bald, he had always led an active life from the trenches of World War I, where he had won his VC, to the beaches of Dunkirk. And he was still fit – or was he? For a moment there was a hint of guilt. After the operation at Quetta was he now fully fit to command?

It was the first time in his life that he had become really ill. The doctor had diagnosed an anal fissure and an operation had been necessary. Then, to make matters worse, a few days after the operation Quetta was struck by the most severe earthquake since the terrible disaster of 1935. The hospital shuddered and swayed, and there was screaming and shouting and nurses running around evacuating everyone into the open. Those who could walk had to help their less fortunate fellow patients. It appeared that he was one of those who could walk and he did his bit, but all the time he was conscious of his recent operation, certain that he would do himself some damage. And he did: his wound opening up again. And the blasted hospital hadn't collapsed, after all!

About two months after his discharge from hospital, he took command of 17 Indian Division, stationed at Poona and ready to leave for the Middle East. He had never thought of refusing on medical grounds. Had he been right? He looked down at the Burmese coastline. He reckoned he had, because by now he was near enough fully recovered from the operation.

He had joined the division at Poona on 8 December 1941, the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and invaded Malaya. But his thoughts were concentrated in the opposite direction: his operational theatre would be the Middle East and not the jungles of South East Asia. Shortly after his arrival, the division began to move out: first 45 Brigade, sailing for Basra, the men complete with thick battle dress against a winter in the desert, and next 44 Brigade. But while at sea both brigades were diverted to Malaya, where they arrived in time to spend the rest of the war as prisoners of the Japanese.

Smyth wondered where this sudden turnabout left him. Then, on 28 December, he was given his new orders. He was to take his headquarters and 46 Brigade – his sole remaining unit – to Burma, where 16 Indian Brigade and 2 Burma Brigade would come under his command to form the new 17 Indian Division. But first he was to report to the commander-in-chief, General Sir Archibald Wavell, in Delhi.



Smyth cast his mind back to his interview with Wavell in the latter's library at Flagstaff House, New Delhi, on Sunday, 28 December 1941.

The commander-in-chief was a tough, stocky man, who had lost his left eye at Ypres in 1915. He did not know fear and he looked as though he had been hewn out of stone. He was a man of strong principles, but behind the stern exterior was a kindly man, a man of poetry, a man of literature. Unfortunately, he was also a man prone to long silences. Anyone in conversation with him had to be prepared for moments when he seemed to gaze into space. Now, in between the silences, he gave Smyth a résumé of the war and his opinion of the Japanese.

'I have recently completed a tour of Burma and Malaya,' he told Smyth.

But he did not say that it had been his first visit to these countries. Like many regular officers of the British and Indian armies, at no time in his service had he been east of Calcutta. He did not know Burma, Malaya, Thailand or the Dutch East Indies and he knew nothing of Japan or China.

He believed that a Japanese attack was not expected. Anyway, personally, he could not see how a Japanese force would make very quick progress down the peninsula towards Singapore. As for Burma, he had been horrified by the complete lack of organisation, intelligence and planning generally to meet a Japanese attack. On the other hand, he assured Smyth that there was no real need to worry too much about the Japanese because he considered them as second-class soldiers.

There was another period of silence, broken by Lady Wavell summoning them to tea. There was no further talk about Burma or exactly what Wavell expected Smyth to do to resolve the situation, but the general became quite voluble and excited as he turned the conversation to pig-sticking.

'Have you done any pig-sticking, Smyth? I wish I had the time to try it. I have read a most interesting book. And then I had the good fortune to meet an old district officer who gave me a first-hand description. You need to be a good horseman and have a cool judgement, because the boar is a fast mover, wild and savage and resolute to the last extremity. It is obviously a great builder of confidence and character, which helped the old district officers in their arduous tasks. Perhaps,' he concluded with a sudden sense of humour, 'we should introduce it into our military training.'

After tea, Wavell saw him out and said, with a confidence Smyth did not share, 'I'm sure you'll have no trouble in handling the Japanese.'

\* \* \*

Looking after Burma was not going to be easy, Smyth considered. Wavell had recently been appointed Supreme Commander of the newly constituted South West Pacific Command – ABDA (American, British, Dutch, Australian) as it became known, and Burma was included in this command.

From a military point of view this was likely to prove a mistake – maybe a costly one – Smyth reflected. Wavell had his headquarters in Java, 2,000 miles from Rangoon, and to make matters worse, there was no reliable means of communication, even by wireless, between Burma and Java and all communications had to be routed through Delhi. So most of Wavell's instructions were going to be based on out-of-date information. What effect is that going to have on the way I fight the battle? Smyth thought anxiously.

'We're about to land, sir.'

Smyth came swiftly back to the present. 'Oh, yes. Thank you.'

Below, the Irrawaddy looked like a small, sparkling stream meandering through green forests, but as the aircraft descended it grew larger and larger, wide enough to take several flying boats, and the magical sparkle changed rapidly to a muddy brown.

As the aircraft came to rest on the wide reaches of the river, air-raid warnings screamed across the city. Near the jetty the boats, already on their way to the plane, turned sharply about and returned to shore. The flying boat was trapped in the middle of the river, a shining silver beacon for the Japanese bombers. How ironic to be blown to smithereens only minutes after arriving in Burma, Smyth thought wryly. But on this particular day the Japanese were interested only in Rangoon Docks, where flashes of flame and billowing black smoke recorded the fall of their bombs. When the all-clear was sounded at last, the boats scurried out again.

Shortly after landing from the flying boat, Smyth reported at Lieut. General Tom Hutton's headquarters in Rangoon. 'I see you received the usual warm greeting the Japs reserve for welcoming British generals,' the army commander said.

'I'm glad it wasn't warmer, sir,' Smyth said.

'Well, the supreme commander had a much hotter reception when he landed at Mingaladon on Christmas Day. He had to dive for shelter in a trench. And seventeen bombs fell within 50 yards of him.'

'That was obviously in deference to his higher rank,' Smyth remarked with a grin. 'The flying boat was much more comfortable than a trench; although, I must admit, it didn't feel as safe at the time!'

Hutton said, 'Well, come along; let's fill you in with the situation.'

The army commander was a tall, tough and wiry man with a rather droopy moustache and a lantern-shaped face. A man who had proved his courage in World War I, being awarded the Military Cross and Bar. Previously, he had been Chief of General Staff at AHQ Delhi, a position which he had enjoyed and to which he had brought considerable administrative talent. He had begged Wavell not to appoint him as Army Commander in Burma, but the C-in-C. had been quite adamant. Now, Hutton gave Smyth evidence of his chief-of-staff attributes with a clear and correct appraisal of the situation.

On the wall was a large map of Burma: 250,000 square miles of long hill ranges, winding rivers, dense jungle split apart by patchworks of paddy fields and a dry zone near the country's navel, which bubbled with oil. Everything seemed to run south: hills, rivers, railways, main roads. Elsewhere, the lines of communication were sparse to nil.

Burma was tucked in between India on the west and China, Indo-China and Thailand on the east. The western and eastern boundaries were marked by high hill ranges covered in dense jungle and stretching all the way down to the sea. To the north towered the eastern massifs of the Himalayas. Burma's long coastline stretched from India's borders along the Bay of Bengal, through the Arakan, to Rangoon in the delta of the great Irrawaddy River. Beyond Rangoon, the coastline fringed the Sittang Estuary and the Gulf of Martaban, dropping like a monkey's tail for some 500 miles to Victoria Point. This part of Lower Burma, called the Tenasserim, was bounded by the sea to its west and Thailand to the east and south.

Hutton ran his pointer down Burma's eastern frontier with Thailand, which stretched for some 800 miles from Chiengrai to the Kra Isthmus. 'That's our front line because, feasibly, the Japanese, with their military camps established in Thailand, could use any of the many routes across the hill ranges.' Hutton tapped the map again, defiantly. 'But my bet is that they will concentrate at Raheng, the Thai border town, and then cross the border and make for Moulmein.'

Hutton told Smyth that 16 Brigade had been dispatched to Kawkaireik to block the immediate threat. But the brigade, as Smyth was to learn all too soon, had not been long in Burma and Brigadier J. K. "Jonah" Jones had assumed command only a few days before its embarkation from India. Like a great number of units in India, the brigade had suffered from "milking" – many of its best personnel being transferred to other formations in the Middle East. A large batch of recruits was rushed in to

make up its numbers three days before embarkation for Burma. The brigade was untrained in jungle warfare, it lacked suitable equipment and its main transport consisted of a small pool of lorries.

Hutton continued, 'Although I feel certain that the main action will be in the south, we need a long stop in the Shan Hills. There could well be a Japanese division there, so I had to keep General Scott's Burma Div. to guard that part of the border with Thailand. If the Chinese can be persuaded to take over the responsibility of that area it would release Scott's division.'

A few weeks earlier, Wavell had flown to Chungking to meet Chiang Kai-shek. What actually happened during their conference only history would decide. It was alleged that Wavell had refused the offer of two Chinese divisions to help in the defence of Burma, but Wavell always stoutly denied this.

There was now the possibility that the Chinese generalissimo would prove cool to subsequent requests for help. But Burma was important to his own survival and the supplies moved north to his forces from Rangoon were vital. He would obviously not be able to stay out of the fight. Smyth had an uncomfortable feeling that he was about to relive his Dunkirk experience.

At the crack of dawn the following morning, Hutton and Smyth arrived at Rangoon's Mingaladon Airfield on their way to visit detachments at Mergui and Tavoy. The air officer commander met them, but was most concerned for their safety, and the paucity of air transport was soon made clear to Smyth when the AOC apologetically confessed that he could only supply one old Blenheim Bomber.

'I can't really say I'm happy about this trip, sir,' he said to Hutton. 'There are some 150 Japanese aircraft within striking distance of Rangoon and you could easily run into some of them.'

But Hutton was insistent. He climbed into the front seat of the Blenheim with the pilot, while Smyth had to lie down in the bomb rack. When the aircraft took off, it was escorted by two antiquated fighters.

They flew to Mergui, at the extreme south of Burma. After a flight of some three hours, a very cramped Smyth climbed down to inspect the Burma Rifles battalion which was defending the town. They then returned north, along the Tenasserim coast, to Tavoy, which was within 300 miles of Bangkok, the main Japanese base in Thailand. The garrison consisted of a Burma Rifles battalion and a police battalion, just converted to a regular role, very raw and untried.

From Tavoy, they continued north to Moulmein, where Smyth's divisional headquarters was to be located, arriving around 16:00 hours. Hutton continued his journey on to Rangoon, leaving a somewhat depressed Smyth behind.

Moulmein was around 100 miles from Rangoon by air and about twice as far by land. Several of Smyth's staff had already arrived and he was soon discussing the situation with them.

They all looked at the map of Burma. 'It's quite obvious, Simmy,' Smyth said to his GSO1, Lieut. Colonel Simpson, 'that there has been an awful balls-up. And we've got to put a finger in the hole in the dyke to stop the water flooding out.'

'There are a lot of holes, sir,' Simmy said.

It was an enormous area of jungle country to cover: some 400 miles from Papun in the north to Mergui in the south; 16 Brigade was in the dense jungle of the Dawna Hills at Kawkareik, 80 miles east of Moulmein; 2 Burma Brigade was scattered over some 300 miles of rough country including Tavoy, 170 miles south of Moulmein, with Mergui another 120 miles beyond that.

'And we have only two brigades,' Smyth said. 'Ekin's 46 Brigade is on its way from Poona, but I'm sure we'll be at grips with the enemy before he arrives. It looks as if we'll be forced to fight in batches. Just what I had hoped to avoid. I wanted to concentrate the force in a tactical position, say behind the Salween, in the Martaban-Bilin area to begin with. Intelligence is so bad it's almost non-existent and we have no real idea of the enemy's strength; one division is the guess, though I would put it at around two.'

'Air cover is not so hot, either, sir,' remarked a staff officer.

'You can say that again,' Smyth snapped. 'I had that brought home to me most forcibly during my flight to the south yesterday. While I lay in the bomb rack, for a moment I felt real despair; and if it hadn't been for my sense of humour I could have burst into tears at the ludicrous situation.'

The RAF consisted of some sixteen Buffaloes and six Blenheims based at Mingaladon, Rangoon's airfield. Fortunately, a squadron of twenty-one Curtis P-40 (Tomahawk) pursuit fighters from Chiang Kai-shek's American Volunteers Group was also based at Mingaladon.

Smyth looked at the map again. 'You know, the ideal ploy would be to break up the Burma Rifles into guerrilla units to harass the enemy in front of a strong base held by our regular battalions. We could hold the enemy, giving time for reinforcements to come into Rangoon. And, if

necessary, we could make another move back to the Sittang, which would be a good place to stand.'

'We'll have to ask for more reinforcements, sir.'

'I'll send General Hutton a report and stress the urgency for at least one division – I very much doubt we'll get more – otherwise, we'll be unlikely to stop the enemy. And as a start, I'm going to ask for 48 Brigade.'

'What about Mergui and Tavoy, sir?'

'I tell you, Simmy, I felt really sorry for their garrisons. Leaving them out on a limb. The airfields there are important, but the strength of the garrisons hardly equates with the importance. I'm sure we'll lose both, but I suppose it will look better on the report if we're seen to go down fighting.' Smyth paused for a moment. 'No, Simmy. I don't believe they have a chance.'

## Chapter Two

### Ambush at Kawkareik

C Company arrived in Rangoon after a long and tedious rail journey to Calcutta, followed by a rough sea crossing. But there was hardly enough time to disembark before Paul was given new instructions to move the company almost at once to Kyaikto in Lower Burma.

The Gurkhas loaded their belongings and stores onto lorries, which took them to Rangoon Railway Station, where they had to unload everything and manhandle it onto the train. Within half an hour, the train pulled out of the station, heading north for Pegu where the line branched, the main line going north to Mandalay while C Company's train followed the track to the east, across the vast paddy fields through Waw to the Sittang River.

As the train rattled over the Sittang Bridge, Paul could see no evidence of a strong guard on the bridge. It was the gateway to Rangoon from Lower Burma. If the Japs blew it up we'd be trapped, he thought. He looked down to the broad river. It had a dark, ominous look about it as it flowed out to the sea, rippling with a powerful current. For a moment he felt an anticipation of fear, as though the river was a serpent waiting for its prey.

Beyond the bridge the line turned sharply south-east to Kyaikto, where the company was to detrain. But when the train pulled up in the station, with squealing brakes and a loud hiss of steam, a young staff captain poked his head through the open window of Paul's compartment.

'Hello. You Cooper?' Grant's the name. Sorry to mess you around. Change of orders, I'm afraid. Please tell your men to stay on the train. I've asked the station master to delay departure.'

Paul sent Gopiram to advise the subedar and then Grant opened out a quarter-inch map of the Kawkareik area and spread it across the seat. 'Let me explain – 16 Brigade is up in the Dawna Hills guarding Kawkareik. We are laying our heaviest bets on the Japs choosing that way to cross the border from Thailand. It's wild, hilly country, with

dense jungle and close-knit bamboo. Used to be the old trade route from Raheng, the Thai border town, into Burma through the pass and 39 miles on to Kawkareik. Those 39 miles are motorable, but you can imagine what it is like: some positively scary, rickety bridges on the way.'

Grant moved his finger along the map. 'Then beyond Kawkareik the road continues westward for about 15 miles to Kyondo, a small village on the river route to Moulmein or Martaban. But at this time of the year it is possible to motor cross-country the 80-odd miles to Moulmein, although it means crossing the Haungtharaw on a ferry.

'Brigadier Jones has instructions to hold the enemy for as long as possible, but not at the expense of getting trapped. He is drastically short of troops to cover all the area around the pass. With two rivers behind him, including a car ferry, he certainly does not want the Japs to infiltrate and cut off his line of withdrawal.

'Now, we have just learned from a local source of a rough path which bypasses Kawkareik and comes out near Kyondo.' He pointed to the small quarter-inch map which, to Paul, seemed all jungle and closely ringed contours. 'While we don't think it will be used as the main push, it could still be an ideal route for a small group to slip through and lay an ambush between Kawkareik and Kyondo. The brigadier is keen to keep a watch on it, so your arrival at this time is a stroke of luck. If you stay on the train for the rest of the journey to Martaban, arrangements have been made to ship you upriver to Kyondo, where you'll be met by a guide. Now, have you any questions?'

'If I may make a point,' Paul said. 'There's another 70 miles or so to the railhead at Martaban and it will be dark by the time we reach it. The men have not eaten since this morning and there's our gear to be sorted out – we have rather more than ordinary marching order.'

'Ah, yes. You'll have to dump any surplus stuff at Martaban and leave someone to guard it. And as for a meal, you're right. Yes. OK, I'll get word to Martaban and arrange for rations and cooking facilities. Anyway, it is safer on the river at night because the Jap aircraft are a bit active during the day.'

Grant returned his map to its case, climbed down to the platform, saluted and marched briskly away. Paul walked along the platform to Tilbir's four-berth compartment which he shared with Jemedar Dilbahadur Gurung, the commander of 10 Platoon, Thandraj Limbu, the quartermaster havildar, and Ganesh Thapa, the havildar major. A runner was sent to bring the other platoon commanders and when they

had all gathered in the compartment, the guard blew his whistle and the train moved out of the station on its way to Martaban.

Tilbir made sure Paul was comfortably seated on one of the lower berths, while the others settled themselves on the opposite bunk or cross-legged on the floor. Tilbir's orderly produced mugs of tea and Paul passed round his cigarettes. When they had all lit up, he told them of the change of plan.

Havildar Amarjit Limbu of 12 Platoon, the youngest of the commanders, seemed the most excited. 'Will we be fighting soon, sahib?'

The others laughed at Amarjit's enthusiasm. 'You should be more careful,' Jemedar Dilbahadur Gurung suggested.

Dilbahadur was a tough, squat man in his early thirties, with a short, thick neck and powerful shoulders.

'Why should Amarjit be more careful?' Paul asked.

It was Tilbir who answered. 'Because in Nepali terms he is a rich man. Of course, as the sahib knows, in Nepal a man does not need large sums of money to be rich, but his *kaakhi ama* has plenty of land and property in Darjeeling.'

'She was my father's younger brother's wife,' Amarjit explained. 'She and my uncle had no family. When my father died they adopted me as their son. My aunt is the clever one with the money – it was through her prodding and skill that my late uncle made his fortune.'

'She did not wish Amarjit to join the army,' Dilbahadur said. 'And if she knew he was about to go to war ... My God!'

'She would certainly have much to say,' Amarjit agreed with feeling. 'She would also spend much time worshipping at the temple doing *puja* and giving the priests handfuls of money to say prayers and weave lucky spells to keep me safe from Japanese bullets. But I had to join the army, sahib. My father and his father before him were military men of some distinction.'

'His father was decorated twice in the Great War,' the subedar added. 'But he was badly wounded. He never really recovered and he died quite young.'

'And what about Jemedar Tule?' Paul asked, looking at 11 Platoon's commander, who was sitting cross-legged in a corner of the compartment; he was a quiet man, in his thirties. 'Has he a rich aunt?'

'He has somebody he calls his aunt,' Dilbahadur said quickly. 'But she is not rich and she is not his aunt!'

Jemedar Tule Pun took the general laughter with good humour. He rubbed his shaven head, his forehead creased in great lines, his eyes

crinkled and his mouth stretched in a wonderful smile which brought a shine to his moon-shaped face. In the general repartee which followed, and at which Nepalis excelled, Paul sat back and relaxed. He was glad of this opportunity to be with his commanders in an atmosphere not stifled by strict discipline. He realised he was fortunate to be able to speak fluent Nepali and to have been brought up in a tea garden surrounded by Nepalis. Of course, there were differences between the peasants who worked on the gardens and the disciplined men of the regiment, but the basics were the same. After all, the platoon commanders had once been peasants themselves. As they talked, the compartment began to grow dark, signifying that a long day was coming to an end, the jungle merging into a dark mass of green as the train rushed past on the last leg of the journey to Martaban.

‘This is as far as the lorries go,’ a staff officer from 16 Brigade told them. The lorries had come off the narrow, bumpy cart track into a large open space surrounded on all sides by dense jungle rising high into the sky to blot out any view.

Earlier, the officer had met C Company on its arrival at Kyondo after a night trip up the Gyaing: a cold journey, the river enveloped in mist, and with daybreak came the eerie calls of birds and animals from behind the mist which thinned slowly in the sunrise.

The men debussed and then the lorries reversed and rumbled back onto the cart track like a herd of elephants, swaying more now that they were empty, and they were soon swallowed up in the jungle.

Paul turned to Tilbir. ‘We will have a fifteen-minute break before moving off.’

The Gurkhas seemed to be in good humour. There had been time at Kyondo that morning for a meal of rice, dal and hot tea; now, the men smoked and chatted as though unconcerned about the dangers the next few days might bring. Armed with .303 Lee Enfields, a Bren gunner in each section, and the section commanders who had tommy guns, they looked tough, as though they could handle any enemy. But it worried Paul that they had not had time for more sessions on the rifle range.

Of course, they all had their khukuris, the national weapon of Nepal: 17 inches long from the top of the handle to the pointed tip of the 12 inch angled blade, honed to a sharpness that could behead a man with one stroke. The blade is usually made from steel railway tracks and even vehicle chassis and springs. Attached to the back of the sheath are two pockets, containing two small knives, one the *chakmak* or sharpener and

flint maker, the other the *karda* for skinning, peeling and slicing. On the blade, near the handle, is a notch shaped like a half moon and jutting out of its middle is a small erection of metal like a penis, because this is a symbol of Hindu fertility and it is called *kaudi*. It also serves a useful purpose by allowing the blood to drip off, so the user does not make a bloody mess of his hand after removing his enemy’s head – or maybe even a chicken, because the khukuri is also an everyday tool in the hills of Nepal, from cutting wood to decapitating a goat for the family meal. A Gurkha has probably had his own khukuri from boyhood, developing the skilled technique which has made the khukuri such a terrible weapon at close quarters in the hand of a Gurkha soldier who wears it sheathed in a frog on the waist belt.

‘All right, fall in.’ Paul swung his pack onto his back; it felt like a ton.

Everything he wanted he would have to carry, because the bulk of the company’s kit, including the bedrolls, had been left at Martaban with the other company stores under the charge of Thandraj, the quartermaster havildar, and a small squad who had not been at all happy at staying behind, but there was really little choice. Everyone had to find room in his own pack for a blanket, a change of clothes and any personal belongings which seemed essential. Rations were a problem, solved by dividing it into small loads and distributing it among the men.

Paul was dressed like the Gurkhas: khaki shirt and shorts – the long, wide shorts which were the hallmark of the Indian Army at that time – thick stockings, puttees and black boots. Besides his pack, he had a haversack, a water bottle, a khukuri and a .38 Smith & Wesson, a weapon which he had fired on the range at OTS and although he proved fairly competent, he would have preferred something with more power. He was a good shot – there had been plenty of game in the tea garden and beyond in the wooded hills. He had also been able to fire a tommy gun on the range, near battalion headquarters, where the British sergeant major in charge had taken him under his wing as he had recognised promise, and Paul had proved a natural. You need to have control of a tommy gun; otherwise, your bullets could fly sky high and at a tangent in all the wrong directions. It was the weapon of choice Paul felt he should have in the jungle against the Japanese, but at that time it was considered ill-advised for an officer to carry one, in case he concentrated more on killing the enemy than moving his men tactically. Paul was determined to get hold of one as soon as possible – and when out of sight. When he had left the luggage guard at Martaban he had purloined

two of their tommy guns, which he gave to Gopiram and Tilbir's orderly; the latter's he would no doubt take for himself at a later date.

The company moved out in single file, two men ahead with khukuris drawn, ready to cut a way through the jungle, followed by Paul and his orderly, Gopiram, and the leading unit which was Dilbahadur's 10 Platoon. They were soon in dense jungle, but the path was fairly clear as it wound its way through the bamboo and undergrowth. Now and again, the jungle encroached on the path and the Gurkhas slashed an opening with their khukuris.

As the day grew rapidly warmer, Paul's chinstrap was like an iron band and he could feel the sweat trickling down his back. Soon, the path became quite steep, the change in movement catching his calves, making the pack on his back seem even heavier.

He noticed that the jungle to his left was thinning out sufficiently for him to see that the path was skirting the back of a narrow *chaung* or stream. Then the path dropped into a hairpin bend and brought the company out onto the *chaung* bed. A bird rose with a sharp cry and flew up the *chaung* with a flash of colour. On the opposite bank there was a crash of bodies through the trees, followed by the whooping of a family of monkeys fading into the distance. Paul halted the column and Dilbahadur came forward to join him.

'Let us take a look a short way up ahead,' Paul said.

They scrambled over the rocky surface. The *chaung* bed was dry, except for small pools of water where swarms of butterflies hovered, dipping from time to time to drink. After a few yards the rocks gave way to sand and the path reappeared, winding up the right bank for about 50 yards along the top before swinging sharply away and into the jungle. The *chaung*, Paul noticed, was by now choked with undergrowth.

About 100 yards further on, the path dropped abruptly again into the *chaung*, having cut off a bend. Now, it was clear of undergrowth and once more the path crossed over to the left bank. Paul halted there and sent Gopiram to bring forward the subedar and the other platoon commanders.

When they arrived he said, 'Can you see a large force using this route?'

Tilbir suggested, 'Large enough, I should think, sahib, to come down behind Kawkareik and cause trouble on the road.'

Paul agreed. 'However, this path must continue for several miles to the top of the range. I do not think we need to go any further, so let us place 10 Platoon to watch the path here on the right bank. There is a good view as the path comes down off the other bank and the platoon

could catch the Japanese in the *chaung*. Then, we will have HQ and 11 Platoon between here and where we first crossed it. And 12 Platoon further back on the left bank.'

Leaving Dilbahadur to place his platoon in its ambush position, with a listening post a short distance in front, Paul moved back about 50 yards and indicated a position for his HQ. Jemedar Tule of 11 Platoon then placed his three sections around Company HQ.

Paul returned along the path and across the *chaung* to where Amarjit was organising 12 Platoon. There was not much room because of the thick jungle, but one section had somehow climbed up the steep hill above and was digging its weapon pits beneath the undergrowth, completely hidden and in a great vantage point.

Paul returned to his HQ, where the construction of canopies from groundsheets, camouflaged by branches, to protect against the heavy overnight dew, was well under way. Later, when everyone had eaten an evening meal, he called a stand-to for half an hour after darkness, every man in the position he would occupy should there be an attack. Then he ordered a stand-down, apart from the sentries. There was nothing else to be done, so like the Gurkhas he turned in for the night.

With darkness the jungle grew cold. Paul, already wearing his army-issue jersey, wrapped a blanket around himself, but he still shivered and he hoped it was not from fear. Would he be afraid? He had been concerned about his young Gurkha recruits, but what about himself, just as much a recruit? Yes, what about himself – the first sight of the Japs, the first sound of a shot – how would he react? Oh, snap out of it, he reprimanded himself, go to sleep! His eyes pricked with tiredness, but still he could not sleep. Around him the jungle and the night mingled like lovers into one dark shape, but without any sound. The silence surprised him; he always believed that night in the jungle was full of sound, but apart from the cry of what he believed to be a tree lizard, and a cough from one of his men, nothing stirred.

Then there was a different call. A single cry from the depths of the jungle. A jackal? Or could it be a Jap imitating an animal? He reached involuntarily for his revolver, but none of his men moved. Then he relaxed a little, confident in the sentries. Or should he be? Should he go round the platoons to make sure? After all, like himself, none of the men had heard a shot fired in anger. But he was beginning to feel comfortably warm at last and suddenly he slipped happily into sleep.

The following morning after stand-down, Paul patrolled forward with a section from Tule's platoon. After a short distance the path turned

away from the *chaung* and wound its way into the jungle-covered hills, widening out beneath a forest of tall teak trees and almost hidden beneath the brown leaves strewn over the forest floor. Paul saw no sign of human life and he returned to the company for the morning meal.

The next few days passed quietly and uneventfully, although every day the distant sound of Japanese bombers was heard as they carried out sorties on the main positions and machine-gunned the lines of communications.

On 19 January 1942, Paul decided to accompany the fatigue party to the lorry terminal to collect the much-needed rations the staff officer had promised would be there and he proved true to his word. In return, the Gurkhas brewed tea for the lorry driver and the staff officer, who was a friendly and talkative person.

‘The Japs have captured Tavoy,’ he said.

This was a small town on the Tenasserim coast some 170 miles south of Moulmein, isolated and an easy prey for the Japanese. Another 120 miles beyond Tavoy was Mergui, now in grave danger.

‘We’re in grave danger ourselves, come to that,’ said the officer. ‘Poor old “Jonah” Jones is in a terrible situation. He’s got three battalions stretched over that wild country. Only one motor road through those hills. I doubt if we’ll be able to hold out for long once the Nips attack. Incidentally, your 46 Brigade has arrived in Rangoon, but God knows if it will move up here in time.’

Gopiram asked if the sahib would like some more tea.

The officer drained his mug. ‘Never say no to cha.’ He held out his mug for a refill. He drank it quickly and then said, ‘Well, cheer up. Things can’t possibly get any worse,’ and climbed into the lorry and looked out of the window. ‘But if I were you I’d keep my ear to the ground. When the brigade moves out, it is going to move out very fast. See you around.’

Paul returned to the company and passed the information on to his platoon commanders. Then, early the following morning, Amarjit hurried over to report shots from the east, but Paul and Tilbir could hear nothing: sound in the jungle was not only deceptive as to distance, but sometimes shots could be heard several miles away and yet not within a few hundred yards. When they moved to Amarjit’s position, however, they could hear what sounded like rifle fire, spasmodic, as though some current of air blew it across in gusts of sound. But was it rifle fire? Surely, Paul thought, the first action would be fought on the far side of the range, down on the Thaungyin River,

which separated Thailand and Burma. Even allowing for the quirks of sound in the jungle, he did not think it possible; more likely burning bamboo a good deal closer.

In the early hours of 20 January 1942, the Japanese had crossed the border into Burma. A company from 1/7th Gurkha Rifles took the first fierce enemy onslaught and became isolated into groups that managed to fight their way out and rejoin the brigade several days later. The enemy was now poised to advance along the main road to Kawkareik, which was evacuated in the early hours of the twenty-first, Jones’ HQ moving back to Milestone 12.

As no British reinforcements were immediately available, if 16 Brigade was overwhelmed there would be little to stop the enemy from sweeping into Moulmein. So, when that evening the brigadier was informed that his forces, positioned in the hills further up the road, could not guarantee to defend much longer without being cut off, he ordered a general withdrawal to Kyondo.

Meanwhile, C Company, out on a limb in its ambush position, had no idea at that time of what was going on in the rest of the area. But as the day was punctuated by distant “crumps” and machine-gun fire, it seemed that the action must have reached the vicinity of Kawkareik.

The company spent another cold, wretched night disturbed by periodic loud explosions and occasional bursts of machine-gun fire and with daybreak of the twenty-second, Paul decided to take out a small patrol.

‘Listen,’ Paul said to the naik in charge, ‘we will have two men forward, then four – including you and me – and then two men further back. If we meet the Japanese, the two at the rear must turn and run straight back to the camp and alert the subedar sahib.’

The little naik nodded his head vigorously and gave the two rear men definite orders. The patrol moved out of the company position, across the *chaung* and past the listening post. A couple of Gurkhas scouted ahead, next came Paul followed by the naik and two men, and then there was a good gap to the runaway men.

The patrol followed the path which wound through dense jungle until, just before reaching the open teak forest, it gave a final twist and for a moment the first scout was out of sight. There was a shout, followed by a burst of machine-gun fire, and screaming metal cut the sides of the jungle and ricocheted off the path. The second scout turned the bend to look and then cried out, his rifle flying into the air as he spun and collapsed into the undergrowth.



Paul turned to the naik. 'Have the back men gone?'

'Yes, huzoor.'

Paul doubled forward to the second scout who was still alive, pulling him back out of sight of the enemy. Then he dropped to the ground and crawled on his stomach to look round the bend. The first scout was obviously dead. About 50 yards above on the open ground, positioned behind the huge teak trees, he could see the shadowy Japanese and hear their excited shouts. Then there was a sound like corks being drawn from bottles, followed shortly after by mortar bombs exploding on either side of the path. And all the time the machine-gunner fired bursts, with rifle shots now added.

'Back to the company on the double,' Paul ordered, hoisting the wounded scout over his shoulder.

The naik picked up the wounded man's rifle. 'Quick, sahib!'

They ran back along the path, the Japanese machine-gunner still firing blindly into the jungle and mortar bombs exploding at intervals. Further along the path, two riflemen crouched to give cover as they passed through before following on behind. The wounded Gurkha was a small man, but as Paul jogged along the path he seemed to get heavier with every stride. Paul felt himself swaying into the jungle wall, the undergrowth ripping at his legs, finding the gap between stocking tops and shorts, spreading thorns like claws with feline fury.

Then somebody was saying, 'Leave him to us, sahib,' and it was Dilbahadur who had come forward with a few men to see him safely back.

Paul reported to the subedar, 'I do not know how many there were. I saw nine or ten; but they could have been an advance group.'

'How far behind, sahib?'

The firing had stopped. 'I should not think they have moved forward at all. Do you think we should attack them?'

Tilbir hesitated for a moment. 'No, sahib. We are in a strong position here. Let them come to our guns.'

'Agreed. Keep everyone in their firing positions.'

Paul returned to his headquarters and only then did he feel himself begin to shake; a tremble in his legs, a slight twitching in his fingers as he fully realised what had happened in the last quarter of an hour. He had not panicked under the pressure of fire, but now he was feeling shit-scared. Hell, this would not do at all. He made a big effort to pull himself together.

The company waited for the anticipated attack. An hour passed in silence, except when a soldier tried to stifle a cough, or monkeys called in the distance, or some birds sang among the trees. Once, Amarjit

came across to say he could hear fierce firing towards the south. Paul still believed the main push was there and they had only bumped a marauding group.

He was standing in his headquarters, looking towards Dilbahadur's platoon, when the silence was shattered by rifle shots and a Bren gun. Almost at that same instant, a machine-gun and rifles opened fire from across the *chaung*, from the densely covered far bank where Paul had thought it would be impossible for the enemy to infiltrate.

There was a sound like an axe hitting a tree trunk and a Gurkha signaller was on his back, a bullet through his head, the chinstrap snapped, the hat lying on the ground, filled with brains and matter spewed out by the force of the bullet. Paul stood like a statue for a moment and then he felt himself being hurled to the ground, lying with Gopiram restraining him, bullets a few inches from their faces, hacking divots out of the ground like a bad golfer.

Paul knew he must force himself to his feet and organise a counter-attack, but as he fought to overcome his fear and put his thoughts into action, the weight of fire around him eased and stopped. He scrambled to his feet, the subedar running to join him as the din of battle now raged out of sight, behind the dense jungle which covered the far bank of the *chaung*. The Japanese had not seen Amarjit's section, well dug in and hidden, and were paying for their mistake as the Gurkhas raked them with deadly, close-range fire. Shouts and screams intermingled with shots and the blast of hand grenades. Amarjit threw in another section and then the fight moved towards 10 Platoon. Paul, running forwards, saw three or four enemy soldiers hurl themselves off the path into the *chaung*, only to be massacred by Dilbahadur's men.

Then there was silence, until from behind the jungle opposite Dilbahadur's position, Amarjit called out, 'It is all right. Do not shoot. It is me. Havildar Amarjit.'

'Come out,' Paul called.

Amarjit stepped down into the *chaung*, a look of triumph on his face which was marked with the dirt of battle. Even his aunt would be proud of him now, Paul thought, as he gave him a "well done". Paul and Tilbir returned to headquarters, where they sat on a groundsheet to discuss the situation.

'I need your help, subedar sahib. Your military experience is greater than mine,' Paul observed.

'But in this kind of war, I am no wiser than you – and the sahib has already done very well.'

‘The sahib has had too much good luck ... what should we do now? I feel we should move out of this position.’

There was something comforting in Tilbir’s calm appearance, looking smart in spite of the conditions. ‘Yes, sahib, we must move. The question is when and where? My feeling is that the Japanese would not have sent two separate groups down the track. And for the moment we are in a strong position over here.’

Paul agreed and the subedar continued, ‘And if I may suggest, the men have not had a hot meal since yesterday.’

‘Then let us put that right straightaway. Meanwhile, I will take a patrol up the track.’

Tilbir looked alarmed. ‘But you are in command of the company. Jemedar Dilbahadur should go.’

A few moments later, Dilbahadur took out one of his sections and followed the path out to where the Gurkha scout had been killed, taking great care in case of ambush, but there was no sign of the enemy. The dead scout lay in the undergrowth; he had obviously been searched and his rifle was missing. They carried his body back to the company position, where Paul decided to have an order group and soon the platoon commanders were gathered around.

‘How many casualties?’ he asked.

Company Havildar Major Ganesh Thapa told him that three riflemen had been killed and three wounded. ‘The wounded scout is a stretcher case, but I think he will be all right for the moment; the medical orderly has given first aid. The others are walking wounded.’

Regarding the enemy, fifteen bodies had been counted. There were also several Arisaka 6.5 bolt action rifles, an LMG – 6.25 Nambu, similar in appearance to the Bren – a mortar, a Jap sword, several ugly looking bayonets, a Jap flag and various documents.

‘It will be dark in a couple of hours,’ Paul said. ‘My plan is that with darkness, we will withdraw to the lorry terminal and wait there until daybreak. The brigade has orders not to become trapped and I am sure is already on the way out. The explosions we have heard are probably demolitions to delay the enemy.’ They then discussed and agreed the order of the march for the move out. ‘Is there anything I have forgotten?’ Paul asked finally.

‘What about the dead men, sahib?’ Ganesh asked.

God! What do we do about the dead?

Tilbir saved him. ‘Of course, as Hindus, they should be cremated, but I think the sahib will agree that we cannot risk the fire; it would also take

some time. May I suggest, sahib, that we bury them temporarily, so that no wild animals can savage them? We should make a note of the map reference, in case at some future date the bodies can be recovered.’

‘I seem to remember, subedar sahib, reading that in World War I, many Gurkhas were never properly buried or cremated. But they were not forgotten, their names listed on monuments for posterity. So, all right, we will leave them, but I hope not forget them. And as for the captured weapons, much as I would like to, we cannot take them with us. Who knows what obstacles lie ahead of us? And we must also carry the wounded man and our own weapons, so render them useless. But we will keep all the documents found on the bodies and the Japanese flag.’

He was very pleased with the way the men had behaved in the heat of battle, in spite of not being fully trained and being in action for the first time, and he told his platoon commanders to pass on his words of praise to the men.

After the order group had broken up, Paul tried to settle down, but the last hour to nightfall seemed to drag. He could not stop himself from being tense, waiting for a sudden shot from behind the jungle wall to signal another full-blooded attack. He could not have welcomed darkness more when it came at last and after a half-hour stand-to, he was able with great relief to give the order to move out.

Dilbahadur led his platoon back quietly, first through Tule’s platoon, next Amarjit’s and then down the path for about half a mile, where he was to take up a position. Next, the wounded party moved out. The scout was carried past on a stretcher made of a groundsheet and stout branches and was covered with a blanket against the cold, which was beginning to sweep through the *chaung* in the first makings of a light mist. Paul put a hand out to touch him as encouragement and he found it seized fiercely for a moment. And then the Gurkha was gone, carried off into the night.

After Company HQ had moved out, Tule’s men tagged on behind and through Amarjit’s platoon. Lastly, Amarjit moved his sections out. Paul marched with his headquarters. It was too dark to see, but he took a final look at the far corner of the bank where his men now lay. Then he forced his mind back to the present, negotiating the rocky section of the *chaung*. The stretcher-bearers almost stumbled but recovered with a clatter of loose stones and Paul held his breath, but the noise was swallowed up in the night.

They came out of the hills about three hours later after a number of false alarms, which had left Paul’s heart beating like mad, and a strength-

sapping trudge down the winding jungle path, forever stopping and starting as happens when some sixty men are moving in single file in the darkness. At last they reached the lorry terminal point and somehow, Paul managed to indicate where the platoons should take up their positions before he sank into a restless sleep and finally into a deeper one.

When he awoke it was with a start. He blinked because the day was bright. And it was quiet. He had slept in a crouched position, enveloped by the undergrowth, and he felt stiff, his boots and puttees soaked by the dew. There was a blanket over his shoulders, damp on the outside but warm on the inside. Gopiram, without a doubt. He struggled to his feet and looked around at the sleeping forms lying everywhere. Must be Sunday, he thought.

He rubbed his hand over his face, which felt only slightly prickly, and was thankful that he didn't have to shave every day. Then, as he stood there, a memory flooded his mind and he remembered where he was. It was not some training exercise. If the Japs came now!

Paul shook the bundle that was Gopiram. The Gurkha sat up, bleary-eyed, looking like a little ornamental gnome in a suburban garden in his woollen cap comforter. Then he came awake and Paul said, 'Rouse them, but quietly.'

As Paul stumbled out of the small circle of bushes which had concealed Company HQ and onto the jungle path, he saw Amarjit's platoon sprawled in sleep. My God! He walked quickly up the path, stopping himself from breaking into a run, and to his great relief he found the sentries awake. A Bren post was manned, the gunner and his number two giving him a half smile.

The time was dead on nine. Why had they not awakened the company for a stand-to? He decided not to ask, as it would be better coming later through their own platoon commander. Instead, he asked, 'Any sign of the enemy?'

'No, huzoor,' replied the Bren-gunner. 'Only a tiger calling out from the far valley. Hungry and sounding bad-tempered, so I think we must have driven off his game. For a moment I thought I was back in the Terai.'

He was talking about the belt of tropical forest below the colder ranges of Nepal. Paul almost wished he were there, too.

'Right, now wake up your platoon.'

By the time Paul returned to his HQ everyone was awake. Tilbir looked a bit sheepish, Paul thought, as the Gurkha's soft brown eyes met his. There was no glint in them this morning, but no doubt that would be put right quite soon.

'I think, sahib,' Paul said, 'now that we are all refreshed from our Sunday morning lie-in, that we will have a stand-to, so that everyone knows his position.'

In a few moments men were flying in all directions and half an hour later, after stand-down, Paul called his order group together. While they talked, the men cooked rice and brewed tea, Paul having decided to risk the chance of the smoke being seen.

'Brigade must have pulled out by now,' Paul observed.

'This must be so,' Tilbir agreed. 'We can hear no firing from their direction. In fact, no firing at all since yesterday.'

'They must have pulled out before becoming involved,' Paul suggested.

'But no one has come to warn us,' Amarjit complained.

'Who knows what may have happened,' Paul defended the brigade staff. 'Somebody sent to tell us may have been killed on the way. We must take it that no one will come now.'

He looked at his quarter-inch map, which was not of much help, but, recalling the lorry trip a few days earlier, he reckoned that they were about 10 miles from Kyondo. His officers agreed they should make that village their destination. After they had all eaten he gave the order to march, deciding to follow the cart track, although the danger of ambush would be greater, because he just did not relish cutting through the jungle or sorting out a maze of path to find the right way. Besides, he wanted to reach the village before nightfall.

They made good progress along the cart track. The two walking wounded – their section comrades keeping a close watch – managed to keep up. The little Gurkha on the stretcher was being very brave.'

Paul could hear no sound of any distant activity and he could see no further than the man in front or to the next bend in the track. The dense jungle wall made him feel like a caterpillar in a cocoon and what world he would emerge into when the jungle cocoon burst open was anyone's guess. He just hoped that part of 16 Brigade would still be at Kyondo and that there would be a chance of river transport and rations, because the last of the rice had been finished with the morning meal.

When the leading platoon reached the road, Paul went forward to where the scouts were crouched, looking through the foliage. He stepped carefully out onto the road. The same stillness. No sound of traffic in the distance. About half a mile to his right were the rooftops of Kyondo village. Above the rooftops, rising into a hot blue sky, was a column of thick black smoke.

'What do you think?' Paul asked Tilbir, who had come up to join him.

The subedar took off his Gurkha felt hat and rubbed the stubble of his shaven head. 'That is a bad sign, sahib. I think equipment is being destroyed.'

'Well, the only thing to do is find out. I will go forward with Tule's platoon. You keep the rest of the company here, sahib.'

The platoon moved forward gingerly, two sections up, one each side of the road, with instructions to dive into the jungle at the first sound of traffic. As they neared the village, Paul could see no sign of movement; the villagers had probably run away to hide in the jungle and no doubt some were watching him now, out of sight behind the thick cover.

At Tule's order, a section doubled forward to the edge of the village to take up positions underneath and around the houses, which were raised off the ground on wooden piles in the traditional Burmese style. Paul saw the section leader stand up suddenly and look further into the village as though he were at attention on parade. Then he turned abruptly and waved. Paul and Tule ran forwards to join him, staring in horror and disbelief at the wreckage of more than a dozen vehicles, some set alight by petrol, the canvas black confetti, the metal framework twisted out of shape, engines smashed beneath crumpled bonnets by pickaxes or charges of explosives. All around the graveyard of vehicles the ground was littered with equipment, from personal belongings to military material, burnt to smouldering rags, and a large dump which was still sending up the column of black smoke.

My God! What was the transport doing here? The vehicles should have taken a turn-off further back along the road from Kawkareik, leading to the Kya-in ferry across the Haungtharaw River, some 8 miles south-west of Kawkareik. The ferry was antiquated and could take only one vehicle at a time. Then there was another stretch of rough track to a second ferry, before meeting up with a fairly good dry-weather road to Moulmein. Meanwhile, troops would take boats down the Gyaing to Moulmein. But something must have gone drastically wrong.

What Paul did not know was that the withdrawal had turned sour. All the transport had been brought into Kawkareik just before dark on 21 January 1942 and the convoy got away from the town at 20.00 hours. The drivers were very nervous, raw and alarmed at the slightest sound. When they reached Kya-in in the dark, the first vehicle onto the ferry was a heavy sappers' truck but, on reaching the far bank, the ferry was not properly tied up and when the truck was being driven off, the moorings gave way. As the truck slipped into the river it took the ferry with it and so marooned the brigade's transport north of the river.

Meanwhile, the brigade carried out its withdrawal, the most forward troops moving back from the crest of the range to Kawkareik. There was a great deal of noise all along the road as kit and ammunition was set alight and the sappers detonated road and bridge demolitions to delay the enemy. Spread throughout 22 January, the brigade arrived at Kyondo in groups and the last of the transport and surplus kit was destroyed.

Brigadier Jones sent his wounded downriver in the only two boats available in the village. Then the brigade followed the Gyaing southwards in groups along the left bank, through rough country, eventually meeting up at Tarana, a steamer station, after a long, weary march with nothing to eat. They had to wait until 04.00 hours on 24 January, when three paddle steamers arrived to take them on to Martaban, where they disembarked some five hours later.

As Paul stood in Kyondo village, on the afternoon of 23 January, not knowing at that time what had happened, he could only surmise the worst: that the Japanese had cut off most of the brigade back at Kawkareik and only a few had managed to escape.

His thoughts were distracted by a slight scuffle and then Tule appeared with a Burmese villager. The man was very frightened, crying out in Burmese, waving his arms. When Tule brought him up to Paul, the man pointed frantically towards the river. But none of them could speak Burmese or even grasp the meaning of his sign language.

At that moment an Indian appeared, in Burmese clothes, wearing a sun hat. 'Sir! Sir!' he called out. 'I speak English jolly good. They went down the river.'

'Who did?'

'The Breetish Army. Many thousands. All yesterday. They came at different times. Blowing up lorries and much goods as you can see. Then they left – towards Moulmein, I think.'

'Downriver, in boats?'

'No, sir. Only two boats in the village and they put the wounded in them and sent them off down the river. Then the army marched off along riverbank.'

'And the Japanese?'

'No sign as yet, sahib. Thank God! Although Japanese planes came over yesterday to bomb the village. But I think they are not too far behind now. You should get away quickly.'

'Where are the villagers?'

‘All gone. Run away. The government officer – the SDO Thakin – told us to go hide when he was passing through on his way out.’

‘Why did you not go?’

‘I did, sir, but had to come back for one or two things I forget.’

‘When did the British Army go?’

‘All gone by yesterday.’

The villager pointed out the route which, apparently, the brigade had taken the previous day. Dusk was near as C Company crossed the village ford and took a well-defined path to a bend in the Gyaing. Then they followed a rough track along the left bank for about half an hour, before moving well into the jungle to hide up for the night.

It was a miserable night, cold and wet, the mist swirling across the river into the jungle, and Paul was worried about the wounded scout and some of the men with a history of malaria; the dampness could bring on attacks during the night. There had been no reviving mug of hot tea, because there was no way he could have risked fires that night. In time, experience would teach him that it was safer to have fires at night in the jungle rather than in the day.

The river was much noisier than the heart of the jungle, every bird cry sharp across the water and the undergrowth rustling as animals of all sizes went down to drink. He just could not fall asleep, every sound jerking him awake, to hold his breath, wondering if it were Japanese, until at last daylight began to show through the mist like sunlight through the slits of a blind. He immediately sent a patrol upriver and on its return, about an hour later, they reported no enemy movement, so he ordered the company to march at once. He wanted to put a good distance between themselves and Kyondo.

After a hard two hours’ march along the jungle path, Paul called a halt and let the men brew up. Thank goodness there was no shortage of tea bags and powdered milk – the hot tea and a cigarette made him feel a good deal better and the men also, no doubt. But, as he had feared, two of the men had suffered attacks of malaria. With the help of other riflemen they had managed to keep up and some aspirins from the medical orderly helped them to sweat it out.

The company continued its march until an hour before nightfall, but not covering any great distance because the path became less distinct and the jungle encroached across it, having to be cut aside so often that Paul was certain the brigade had not used this route. The Indian in the village must obviously have sent them the wrong way.

Paul again moved the company deeper into the jungle for the night; another difficult one, he expected. But through sheer weariness he nodded off quite quickly, only to be awoken by urgent shaking.

‘Careful, sahib,’ Gopiram warned in case he spoke loudly in the confused moment of awakening. ‘Dilbahadur Sahib is here.’

The tough, stocky jemedar crawled forwards. ‘Sahib, I think there is a fire not far from us. One of my sentries saw a faint gleam of firelight for a moment and called me. I looked for a long time, thinking he was mistaken, but suddenly I, too, saw just a glimmer as the wind blew the leaves apart for a moment. It is only one camp fire, I think.’

Paul accompanied Dilbahadur stealthily through the jungle to the forward post. The mist was beginning to creep up, slowly filling the hollow which lay beneath them, ascending the slope on the other side which was a dark mass of jungle. The sentry had placed two sticks as pointers towards the place where he had seen the fire. Paul looked along the sticks, but there was now only a wall of jungle. He waited about half an hour, but no flame revealed itself and then the mist finally curtailed any further chance.

Telling the sentry to keep a close watch, Paul returned to his HQ. There was or had been a camp fire, of that he had no doubt; Dilbahadur’s sharp eyes were sufficient proof for him. But who had lit the fire? Some stragglers from the brigade seemed the most likely. But Japanese? He knew enough about the enemy now to realise that it was possible.

Dilbahadur agreed with him, but Paul said, ‘We must wait till the morning. It would be foolish to attempt anything in the dark.’

In the morning, when the company had stood to quietly, Paul sent a section on patrol about a mile back towards Kyondo, while he took out another section and moved forward. The hollow, he found, was full of elephant grass and it hid a small stream about waist deep but easily waded. The far side the path was free of jungle and was more defined. But the section leader, experienced in hunting wild game, declared that the brigade had not come this way. After another half a mile, Paul turned back to the camp. The second patrol returned at about the same time, to report no sign of any close enemy pursuit.

Calling the platoon commanders together, Paul said, ‘We can either continue along the path and leave whoever is up on the hill alone or we can investigate.’

‘Sahib,’ said Tilbir, ‘could not a boat have been taken from the river, pulled up the stream and hidden in the elephant grass?’

Paul agreed. 'But it must be a very long chance.'

'But worthwhile sparing a little time to look.' Tilbir was concerned about the wounded scout who had become delirious and there had been another case of malaria that morning.

'Then we will have a look,' Paul said to his men's obvious relief. 'We will move out in a few minutes, as though we were continuing our march, until we pass out of sight round the far side of the hill. I shall then take two sections and return through the belt of thick jungle I noticed on my patrol this morning and down into the elephant grass from that side. Meanwhile, I think we should leave a section in position here; in fact, where the sentry was when he saw the fire. And in hiding, in case somebody tries to escape that way.' He turned to Dilbahadur. 'As your section is already in the right place that is the one I shall leave behind and I think you had best remain with it. As for the other sections ...' Paul looked at Tilbir because he did not want the men to think he favoured any particular platoon.

Tilbir designated two sections from 11 Platoon.

'And I must come with the sahib,' Tule said quickly. His platoon had suffered the most casualties but had still to fire a shot in anger.

They moved out of camp, Amarjit's platoon leading, and waded into the stream, the mist clearing rapidly. Beyond the *chaung* they came into thick jungle again and after a short distance Paul halted the company, leaving it in Tilbir's command. Then, with Tule and his sections, Paul retraced his steps to the edge of the jungle and climbed through the tall trees with low shrub interlaced and groups of thicker, prickly undergrowth. The mist, which he had hoped might give him some cover, was thinning out quickly in a warmer morning than usual.

Paul struggled through the thick undergrowth, trying not to make much sound. The tommy gun he had armed himself with for the occasion began to feel heavy. On either side of him, the Gurkhas moved quietly and much more easily.

As he fought his way through a shrub, the ground fell sharply from under his feet and he slithered down a fall of red earth where a large tree had once stood, the clatter of loose stones sounding like a landslide. He came to his feet quickly, bursting through a thin screen of jungle and out into an open space with a Gurkha at his heels.

As Paul came through the tangle of creepers, which snapped under his weight, he took in the scene before him: the still-glowing embers of a fire and around it four men. They looked at each other for a moment, Paul hesitating in case they should be Burmese villagers. But one of

them jumped to his feet and fired, and Paul heard the Gurkha coming up behind him give a low cry. Then Paul was firing, raking the man with a burst, sending him sprawling into the fire. The other three were seizing their weapons. Paul's tommy gun clattered in the confined space, echoing between the trees. He saw another man fall. Shots whined past him. Then a fusillade of fire from his right dropped the two remaining men in their tracks.

Tule was shouting, 'Sahib! Are you all right?'

Paul glanced over his shoulder. The little Gurkha rifleman was sitting on his haunches, holding an arm but grinning to show he was not badly hurt. In great relief, Paul walked over to the camp fire.

'Look, sahib,' Tule said excitedly, opening a bundle which contained Japanese uniforms.

One of the men called out, 'There is a path down here to the stream.'

'Wait!' Paul shouted in alarm. 'Dilbahadur's men are on the far side. We do not want anyone shot by mistake. I will go first and call out, so he knows who it is.'

He led the way, helling across to Dilbahadur, who answered. Following the path as it wound into the elephant grass, he found four boats, well concealed from the view of anyone approaching along the riverbank. They were large craft, each equipped with an outboard motor and capable of taking about twenty men. It would seem that the enemy had infiltrated men in disguise to station boats at various points along the river for the oncoming army to use in its attack on Moulmein.

But they were not going to use these boats.