

Vietnam *and the* Unravelling of Empire

General Gracey in Asia 1942-1951

T.O. Smith



Vietnam and the Unravelling of Empire

Also by T.O. Smith

BRITAIN AND THE ORIGINS OF THE VIETNAM WAR: UK Policy in Indo-China
1943–50

CHURCHILL, AMERICA AND VIETNAM, 1941–45

Vietnam and the Unravelling of Empire

General Gracey in Asia 1942–1951

T.O. Smith

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For Tom, Helen, Ellie and my students

Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.

Proverbs 3: 13–17

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Abbreviations

CCS	Combined Chiefs of Staff
COS	Chiefs of Staff (British)
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee
JSM	Joint Service Mission (Washington)
PM	Prime Minister
SEAC	Southeast Asia Command
SOE	Special Operations Executive
UN	United Nations

Introduction

Gracey, after brilliantly commanding his division, carried out in an outstanding manner a most difficult military-political task in Indo-China.¹

Field Marshal Viscount Slim

Hitherto there have been a number of excellent studies concerning Britain's brief but controversial involvement in the origins of the Vietnam War. Yet despite the quantity of sophisticated Anglo-centric accounts with reference to Britain's involvement in Vietnam in 1945, mainstream historians have been too content to follow like sheep the doyens of the past. The result has been to either prosecute or defend the actions of the British commanding officer in Saigon – Major-General Sir Douglas David Gracey. But in doing so, little attention has been given to either the context of Gracey's Indo-Chinese deployment (the Burma Campaign 1942–1945) or the consequence (the First Kashmir War 1947–1948) of these first British brushes with post-war Asian nationalism. The present volume therefore argues for a reappraisal of Gracey's French Indo-China deployment outside of the narrow confines of the Vietnam War (to include Burma, Cambodia and Kashmir within the Gracey narrative) in order to understand more broadly British foreign policy and the decline of the British Empire.

At the time of his death in 1964, General Sir Douglas David Gracey had enjoyed 13 years of a modest and tranquil retirement from military life. During this period, he lived in the affluent British county of Surrey

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and indulged in his passion for the gentleman's game of cricket with membership of the Marylebone Cricket Club – otherwise known as the MCC or Lord's. Even in this idyllic environment, Gracey displayed a deep-seated paternalistic concern for the common soldiery – an intense duty of care that had been exhibited throughout his military career. Therefore, it was only natural in retirement that he should serve as the chairman of the Royal Hospital for the Incurables in Putney.² He also indulged in his affection for his 'boys' with an immensely glowing foreword to the privately published diaries of Major Anthony Bickersteth who, during the Burma Campaign 1942–1945, had commanded Princess Mary's 4/10th Gurkha Rifles in Gracey's 20th Indian Division.³

The affectionate, proud and yet unassuming closeness to his officers and men was not surprising. These were the veterans of the long forgotten 14th Army – led by Slim. They had desperately fought one of the most brutal British campaigns of the Second World War along the Burma front and then, following the Japanese surrender in 1945, dutifully stepped in to police the power vacuum in Southeast Asia on behalf of the newly established United Nations Organisation. In comparison to the bravado of the fighting 8th Army and the familiar household name of Field Marshal Montgomery, or even the Whitehall chiefs such as Field Marshal Alanbrooke, Air Chief Marshal Portal and others, it was unsurprising that the dynamic and inspirational men (Slim and his divisional commanders: Major-General Harold Briggs, Gracey and Major-General Frank Messervy) who had led British, Indian and Gurkha troops through some of the world's toughest jungle terrains – while others clamoured for glory and honour closer to home – stood silent guard over their comrades while nursing the wounds of the past.

It could have remained thus, with Gracey being remembered with modest praise by Slim for his diligent command of the 20th Indian Division both in wartime and retirement. But Slim considered Gracey worthy of greater commendation. In Gracey, Slim found a dynamic divisional commander who was 'full of energy and ideas'. Furthermore, Slim observed during the Burma Campaign that with the forces under Gracey he 'had never seen troops who carried their tails more vertically'.⁴ Despite the obvious risk of encountering the Japanese, Gracey's troops also had to contend with malaria, the harsh jungle foliage, insects, leeches, snakes, leopards, tigers, elephants and saltwater crocodiles.⁵ In these hazardous circumstances, Gracey developed a happy, tight-knit and confident division that – due to the unusual length of his tenure – was justly proud of its commanding officer.⁶

Nevertheless after Gracey's retirement, with the advent of the Cold War, a number of Anglo-American writers sought to reassess Gracey's

legacy. The Burma Campaign did not attract their attention but rather Gracey's management of the power vacuum in southern Vietnam in 1945. In doing so, it became overly fashionable to attack Gracey's command in Saigon in order to blame Britain – and specifically Gracey – for the American entanglement in what would later become known as the Vietnam War.⁷ In such circumstances, an outstanding military reputation built during the Burma campaign became first of all soiled, then damaged and finally destroyed, by the complexity of Allied liberation duties. In addition, and perhaps more unfairly, all of the evils of empire – to a greater or a lesser degree – were bestowed upon Gracey. He embodied the servitude of the past. At the same time, the indigenous Vietnamese became the victims of the future.

As early as 1955, nine years before Gracey's death, the American author Ellen Hammer set out in her book, *The Struggle for Indochina 1940–55* (1955), the hypothesis that Gracey, a rabid imperialist, had actively sought to ensure a French return to Vietnam vis-à-vis the birth of an independent indigenous Vietnam.

Gracey took it upon himself to restore Indo-China south of the sixteenth parallel to the French and thereby engaged the British Government in a responsibility for the war which followed.⁸

This was followed by a slew of works: *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, Volume 1 (1966) by Joseph Buttinger; *Abuse of Power* (1967) by Theodore Draper; *The United States and Vietnam* (1967) by George Kahin and John Lewis; *The British in Vietnam* (1970) by George Rosie; *Why Vietnam?* (1980) by Archimedes Patti – a former Office of Strategic Services officer and commander of the first Office of Strategic Services team in Hanoi in 1945; *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (1984) by Barbara Tuchmann; and *The Politics of Continuity: British Foreign Policy and the Labour Government 1945–1946* (1993) by John Saville. All of these books highlighted Gracey's pro-imperialist management of southern Vietnam in 1945.⁹

Patti, in particular, regarded Britain's actions as directly contributing to the outbreak of the First Vietnam War (1946–1954).¹⁰ According to Patti, Gracey's liberation actions were 'ill-considered', 'highly questionable' and 'highhanded'. In a devastating assessment of Gracey's command, Patti concluded that Gracey was 'a man without a plan. He merely reacted to events as they occurred, neither anticipating them nor appreciating their impact after the fact'. Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese communist leader of the nationalist Vietminh coalition, naturally shared Patti's poor evaluation of Gracey. Patti recorded that

'Gracey was an inveterate colonial official dedicated to the perpetuation of the old order'.¹¹

Likewise the British journalist, Rosie, was exceptionally damning in his criticism of events in southern Vietnam. The 20th Indian Division had been 'implicitly ruthless' in their actions. This had immediately resulted in 'alarming directness' by the British, which had 'cost the lives of thousands of Vietnamese'. In his analysis, Rosie argued that Gracey was naturally 'highly suspicious of the Vietminh' and displayed 'evidence of strong pro-French feelings'. Rosie concluded that in taking such brutal measures the forces at Gracey's disposal had become 'overtly political'. Therefore, instead of overseeing United Nations post-surrender duties 'the general [Gracey] took sides' and prevented a more consultative and conciliatory homecoming for French imperialism.¹²

More recently, Mark Lawrence's book, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (2005), argued that Gracey had acted 'boldly' with a 'naked policy of suppression' towards the Vietnamese. In doing so, Gracey had pursued a 'brazenly pro-French policy', which had resulted in Allied liberation forces 'burning down houses' and carrying out other such insalubrious tasks. French colonial rule had in this grubby manner been 'returned behind a temporary shield provided by Britain'.¹³

As a result, these authors have made certain that Gracey has been vilified by an inundation of criticism. This has created the myth that, had it not been for the on-the-ground actions of the Allied liberation commander in Saigon (Gracey) in 1945, Vietnamese nationalism would have flourished, and thereby Gracey could have prevented a further 30 years of needless bloodshed.

In this regard, Gracey certainly did not help his own reputation. He greatly assisted his detractors by allowing them to condemn him with his own words. At a meeting of the Royal Central Asian Society in 1953, Gracey stated that in Saigon:

I was welcomed on arrival by the Vietminh who said 'Welcome' and all that sort of thing. It was a very unpleasant situation, and I promptly kicked them out.

Dennis Duncanson later argued that the comment was 'spontaneous and unconsidered'.¹⁴ But the damage was done. The protagonist had readily supplied proof that, at heart, he was an uncompromising imperialist, an old style colonialist and a racist who belonged to the forgotten age of the mid-Victorian Empire.

Yet if the case for Gracey's prosecution has been well supported, so too have been the grounds for his defence. F.S.V. Donnison's book, *British Military Administration in the Far East 1943–1946* (1956), skilfully emphasised the complex issues surrounding inadequate British troop numbers being deployed to police an intricate power vacuum in Southeast Asia in 1945. In southern Vietnam, the Vietminh had 'no authority and there was not effective administration, and no maintenance of order whatsoever'. Gracey therefore had to act in order to ensure the well-being of the civilian population and also of his own forces. In doing so, this had to be achieved against a number of 'brutal methods adopted by the Vietminh extremists'.¹⁵

Later Peter Dunn in *The First Vietnam War* (1985) and Dennis Duncanson, in an article for the *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* (1968), both offered full-bodied justifications for Gracey's actions vis-à-vis his detractors.¹⁶ Duncanson, in particular, highlighted that despite the unusual modus operandi and the difficult operating conditions in southern Indo-China, Gracey always acted completely within the confines of British military policy, The Hague Convention and international law:

The authority of the power of the state having passed de facto into the hands of the occupant, the latter shall do all in his power to restore, and to ensure as far as possible, public order and safety, respecting at the same time, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country.¹⁷

While at the same time, Dunn was vehemently critical of the Supreme Allied Commander for Southeast Asia, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, for failing to support Gracey with an adequate number of liberation forces. As a result Dunn portrayed Gracey as a proficient soldier betrayed by his superiors and held hostage to fortune.¹⁸

Peter Dennis' book the *Troubled Days of Peace: Mountbatten and South East Asia Command 1945–46* (1987) offered an important comparative history of the power vacuum in Vietnam and the power vacuum in the Dutch East Indies during the same time period. Although this work was even-handed in its assessment of Gracey, tellingly, Dennis' analysis was far more supportive in its defence of Mountbatten than the commanding officer on-the-ground in Saigon.¹⁹ More recently, John Springhall's spirited defence of Gracey for the *Journal of Contemporary History* (2005) argued that Gracey had unfairly become the general embodiment for the rebirth of French colonialism in Southeast Asia.²⁰

Most of these conventional historical works – for either the prosecution or the defence – have focused upon an Anglo-centric approach towards the crucial year of 1945. But in contrast to such studies, Peter Neville's impressive book *Britain in Vietnam: Prelude to Disaster 1945–46* (2008) has sought to defend Gracey's actions by placing British actions within a wider geopolitical context up until the end of 1946. After all 'Gracey was ultimately the servant of British diplomatic and military strategy'. In consequence, Neville has usefully examined a broader chronological and politico-military framework concerning Britain, China, France, the Soviet Union, the United States and a constantly changing plethora of Vietnamese nationalist groupings.²¹

Finally, although historians should avoid writing in the first person, I must acknowledge that this is not my first foray into the Gracey debate. As an academic interested in British decolonisation and international history in Southeast Asia, it has been necessary to pass comment on Gracey's liberation of Vietnam as part of a number of wider studies concerning the dynamics of British foreign policy in the region. Indeed, my article 'Britain and Cambodia, September 1945–November 1946: A Reappraisal' for the journal *Diplomacy and Statecraft* (2006) re-examined British policy towards Cambodia and provided a much needed contrast to British policy towards Vietnam.²² This was recognised by Neville who highlighted how the article 'usefully discussed' British and French participation in Cambodia.²³ Although the article's remit was far broader in scope than a study of Gracey and British liberation duties in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh, the article sought to build upon Dennis' earlier comparison of British policy towards Vietnam and the Dutch East Indies and offer a contrast between British approaches within French Indo-China (Cambodia and Vietnam).²⁴ Similarly my subsequent tome, *Britain and the Origins of the Vietnam War: UK Policy in Indo-China 1943–50* (2007), again examined British liberation duties as part of a wider discussion of British foreign policy towards Vietnam between the Second World War and the Cold War.²⁵ Later, in an early attempt to develop some of the central themes for this study, I returned to the circumstances surrounding Gracey's role in Saigon and Phnom Penh with an article in 2010 that questioned whether Gracey practised peacekeeping or peace enforcement in the delivery of his Indo-Chinese liberation duties.²⁶

Thus amidst the richness of these Anglo-centric studies, the question that needs to be asked is why does British foreign policy – and in particular the actions of Gracey – warrant further examination? The answer is fairly simple. In notable contrast to the studies mentioned above,

Vietnam and the Unravelling of Empire: General Gracey in Asia 1942–1951 expands the debate in four significant ways.

First, to understand Gracey's *modus operandi* in Vietnam, this study briefly looks at Gracey's role in the Burma Campaign of 1942–1945. Gracey himself wrote an unpublished history of the 20th Indian Division and its operations along the Burma front.²⁷ It is not the intention of this book to reproduce that account here but rather to re-examine the Burma Campaign in order to understand more fully both the military context of the power vacuum in Asia, the experience of the soldiers that were being expected to police the peace, and the leadership attributes of the central character – Gracey – for what followed in Vietnam, Cambodia and Kashmir.

Second, this study integrates Gracey's operations in Cambodia into the narrative of his operations in Vietnam. This vital French Indo-Chinese comparison sheds a new light on previous claims concerning Gracey's fanatical imperialism and racism. Had Gracey truly been an old school colonial warrior, he would have ruthlessly pursued similar policies in Cambodia and Vietnam in a uniform attempt to restore the French Empire with little care for either the indigenous Cambodian or Vietnamese populations – as his accusers have often argued, based purely upon his actions in Vietnam. For example in Cambodia:

the Anglo-Indian troops of General Gracey rapidly put an end to the independence proclaimed by Prime Minister Son Ngoc Thanh, opening the country to French troops.²⁸

Yet at the same time, Gracey had actually argued for Cambodia that Britain should 'condone the past actions of the P.M. [Son Ngoc Thanh] and to enlist his support; in fact to treat him in the same manner that we had dealt with Aung San in Burma'. In other words, Gracey radically proposed for Britain to work alongside the emergent Cambodian nationalist movement.²⁹

Third, this study uniquely examines the aftermath of Gracey's intervention in French Indo-China not by analysing subsequent events in Vietnam but by instead examining Gracey's next crucial command in Asia – Pakistan. The simple fact that Mountbatten personally recommended Gracey to Mohammed Ali Jinnah (the Governor-General of Pakistan) as the temporary Governor of East Bengal highlighted both Gracey's sensitivity and skill in dealing with indigenous nationalist struggles. Indeed, Mountbatten specifically chose Gracey 'in view of his great experience as an administrator in French Indo-China'.³⁰ This

revelation directly contradicts much of the negative historiographical analysis concerning Gracey and Vietnam. And it certainly creates a new perspective on the Gracey–Mountbatten relationship.

In regard to Pakistan, it is also imperative to look at Gracey's role in the outbreak of the First Kashmir War – another Asian power vacuum scenario. The East Bengal recommendation and the Kashmir crisis are deeply revealing. Mountbatten's assessment of Gracey's actions in Saigon had only been sent to the British Chiefs of Staff in June 1947. The subsequent pessimistic historical debate surrounding Gracey's command in Vietnam has focused on Mountbatten's appraisal. In the report, Mountbatten had praised Gracey's 'courage and determination in an extremely difficult situation', but Mountbatten had also been critical of Gracey for exceeding his orders. He even bluntly accused Gracey of giving 'permission' for the French coup d'état. Yet two months after writing this evaluation, Mountbatten was personally recommending Gracey to Jinnah for his crisis management skills.³¹

Fourth, rather than focusing this book on purely British foreign and military policies towards Vietnam or even attempting a service biography of Gracey, this study builds upon previous narratives of British actions towards Cambodia, Vietnam and Kashmir and creates a wider commentary on the dynamics of one of Britain's first contemporary Asian peace enforcement activities (a fusion of British foreign and military policies). The newly born United Nations emerged in a humanitarian maelstrom at the end of the Second World War. Faced with numerous power vacuums, economic dislocation, social displacement and global famine, it did not possess the experience, the expertise or the resources to practise effective peacekeeping. Instead, peace enforcement was the only option available as the old world colonial order began to disintegrate and the new world's clamour for decolonisation gathered pace.

In this context, readers should not therefore view this study as an apology for Gracey. It is also not a detailed military history of events on the ground in Vietnam, Cambodia and Kashmir. But rather this book is a re-examination of the early practice of peace enforcement – particularly high-policy decisions concerning military and humanitarian aid. In addition, it is a defence of the fog of war thesis, both in the power vacuum in French Indo-China at the end of the Second World War and also in the first Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan in 1947–1948. In doing so, this work is not only concerned with the maintenance of law and order but also with other pertinent issues such as food supply, dockyard provision and essential services. Thus the origins