

'These stories are so harrowing, their witness so precise and devastating' *The Times*

FORGOTTEN VOICES OF BURMA

THE SECOND WORLD WAR'S FORGOTTEN CONFLICT



JULIAN THOMPSON

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

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About the Book

From the end of 1941 to 1945 a pivotal but often overlooked conflict was being fought in the South-East Asian Theatre of World War II – the Burma Campaign.

In 1941 the Allies fought in a disastrous retreat across Burma against the Japanese – an enemy more prepared, better organised and more powerful than anyone had imagined. Yet in 1944, following key battles at Kohima and Imphal, and daring operations behind enemy lines by the Chindits, the Commonwealth army was back, retaking lost ground one bloody battle at a time.

Fighting in dense jungle and open paddy fields, this brutal campaign was the longest fought by the British Commonwealth in the Second World War. But the troops taking part were a forgotten army, and the story of their remarkable feats and their courage is told – much of it for the first time – in this remarkable new oral history.

About the Author

Julian Thompson served in the Royal Marines for 34 years, retiring as Major General. He commanded 3 Commando Brigade, which carried out the initial landings in the Falklands conflict and fought most of the subsequent land battles. He is now Visiting Professor in the Department of War Studies, King's College, London and is the author of the critically acclaimed *The Imperial War Museum Book of the War in Burma 1942-1945*.

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FORGOTTEN VOICES OF BURMA

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THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM
JULIAN THOMPSON



EBURY
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Maps

Burma

The Arakan Campaigns

The Chindit Expeditions

Northern Burma

The Kohima Battle

The Imphal Battle

Southern Burma

Author's Preface

The war in Burma was the largest land campaign fought by the Western Allies against the Japanese in the Second World War. For the British, it was the longest of any fought on land in that war.

Initially, the Japanese invaded southern Burma to protect the flank of their invasion of Malaya. They subsequently occupied the rest of Burma because they viewed it as the western bastion of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, their name for their conquered territories. But, in addition, by holding Burma the Japanese were able to cut the only land route by which the Chinese could be supplied: the Burma Road that ran from Rangoon north-east into China. As an added bonus, Burmese oil would be a welcome addition to the Japanese economy.

The entry of Japan into the Second World War found the defence of Burma unprepared. No invasion threat from the east was anticipated; the British deemed the jungle and mountain terrain to be impassable by any invader. Although, strategically, the British colony was an outpost for the defence of India, no railways and only one underdeveloped road connected the two countries; the section from Imphal to Kalewa, some 185 miles, was a mixture of cart track and bridleway.

Since August 1940, Burma had been under command of the Commander-in-Chief Far East, based in Singapore. The Far East was, in the British Government's view, low on the priority list for all manner of warfighting equipment. Burma, as an adjunct to that theatre, was almost off the list

altogether. Only on 12 December 1941, four days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, did General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief India, finally persuade Winston Churchill that Burma should be part of his area of responsibility.

Once Burma had fallen to the Japanese, it took about two years for the British – in the persons of Winston Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff – to decide on strategy in the region. There were four courses open to them: one, to invade overland; two, to invade from the sea; three, a combination of the first two; four, to bypass Burma altogether and head straight to retake Malaya by seaborne assault. The British were not entirely free agents in the matter, for not only were the Americans the dominant partner in the war against Japan, but they also supplied most of the transport aircraft to the RAF and USAAF supporting the British effort in Burma. The Americans were not in the least interested in helping the British regain a lost part of their empire. Their sole motive for supporting the British was to maintain their supply route to Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese, initially by air, but by road after north Burma was liberated.

Contrary to popular belief, the Japanese had no experience in fighting in the jungle before the invasion of Malaya in December 1941. They owed their success to the high standard of training and toughness of their soldiers. Long marches and demanding field exercises had transformed them into superb light infantry, able to cover long distances on foot over rough terrain, carrying heavy loads. Rugged, pitiless and redoubtable, they were a formidable foe. Surrender was inconceivable. Death – either at the hands of the enemy or by one's own – was the only honourable exit from the fight. Prisoners were regarded with contempt, as expendable, and treated accordingly. When the British met the Japanese in battle, their prejudiced opinions of the enemy as inferior suffered

a severe shock. They found that, man for man, the Japanese were better soldiers than the Germans.

By the end of the campaign in Burma in August 1945, about 106,000 Japanese had been killed and wounded, and some 1,700 taken prisoner, of whom only four hundred were physically fit – the remainder being wounded or desperately ill. No regular officers surrendered, and none senior to major. Once captured, for the first week most prisoners tried to commit suicide, using whatever means they had to hand. A British officer reported seeing a Japanese prisoner who had cut his own throat with the jagged edge of a bully-beef tin. He was a soldier, not an officer. If prisoners survived, they cooperated with their interrogators, not through cowardice, but merely because no one had ever instructed them what to do in these circumstances, because it had never occurred to their senior commanders that any Japanese soldier would allow himself to be taken alive.

Desmond Whyte, a doctor with the Chindits, remarked:

We underestimated the Japanese to begin with. They worshipped the Emperor as a God. They wished to die in his service. They had utter disregard of danger, and devious tactics; one could not help but admire them. In the early days they really were an invincible force until we learnt jungle craft and battle craft and realised we were superior. They were utterly ruthless and without compassion. I found a friend pinioned to a teak tree with a bayonet through both left and right wrist, and the lower limbs missing, eaten by jackals. The aim was to make us so terrified that we wouldn't wish to continue fighting. It had the opposite effect.

Until the British acquired the necessary jungle and battle craft, the Japanese were regarded as invincible. This was to

change, but the process took time and cost many lives.

Burma is a large country, and if superimposed on a map of Europe, Fort Hertz in the extreme north would be in the middle of the North Sea, Mandalay near Paris, Rangoon where the Pyrenees meet the Mediterranean, and Moulmein on Marseilles. Victoria Point, at the southern end of the long isthmus of Tenassarim, would be three-quarters of the way across the Mediterranean.

The country is surrounded on three sides by mountain ranges covered in thick jungle. Four great rivers flow south into the Bay of Bengal. The Irrawaddy and its major tributary the Chindwin rise in the Himalayas to the north; to the east flow two more large rivers, the Sittang and the Salween. All have numerous tributaries, most of which are a serious obstacle to movement. The valleys in central Burma open out into thickly wooded plains, dotted with low hills. In the flatter areas rice is cultivated in paddy fields. South of Mandalay and Shwebo the country is arid with sparse vegetation.

In the cold weather, from mid-October to March, the climate is perfect, warm and dry by day and cool at night, but temperatures rise in April and May, and the heat strikes like an open oven with high humidity. The monsoon arrives in mid-May and lasts until about mid-September, enveloping the whole of Burma and Assam, except for the dry zone around Mandalay and Meiktila. During the monsoon malaria and dysentery flourish; the rivers swell; valleys and flat areas flood; thick cloud, thunderstorms and turbulence make flying extremely hazardous.

In one year, 1943-44, British and other Allied troops recorded 250,000 cases of malaria and dysentery. The rate of men falling sick in Burma equals those in earlier wars, before the introduction of modern medicine. For example, in 1943, for every man admitted to hospital with wounds, there were 120 from tropical diseases. By 1945 the rate

dropped to ten men sick for one wounded, and in the last six months of the war, to six for one.

The Burmans, the indigenous Burmese, lived mainly in the centre of the country. They resented British rule, and disliked the thousands of Indians imported by the British to work on the railways and other public projects. They had no love for the Chinese, who, along with the Indians, had monopolised sections of the economy, including the rice trade, enriching themselves in the process. Before the British arrived, the Burmese had persecuted the Karens, Shans, Kachins and Chins, tribespeople living in the hills and mountains to the east, north and west of central Burma, and have continued to do so since independence in 1948.

In this book I use the term British to refer to forces from the then British Empire and Commonwealth. In Burma this included 340,000 Indians of many races: Sikhs, Rajputs, Baluchis, Punjabis and Gurkhas, to name but some. The Indians outnumbered the forces from all the other allies added together. Some 100,000 British fought in Burma, as did 90,000 Africans and about 66,000 Chinese. Around 60,000 Americans took part, most of them from the forty-seven United States Army Air Force (USAAF) squadrons (there were fifty-one British and Commonwealth squadrons). The overwhelming majority of accounts in my book are by soldiers from Britain – perfectly understandable in the archives of a national museum. It also reflects the fact that by the time the project was taken in hand by the Imperial War Museum, most soldiers of the old British Indian Army were difficult or even impossible to trace. Of those that have been interviewed, even fewer were translated, but some have now been transcribed and translated specifically for this book. The same constraint applies to the Africans and the Japanese.

The Indians who fought in Burma were part of the largest all-volunteer army in history. John Randle, whose

testimony appears in this book, explains the ethos of that army:

The Indian soldier wasn't fighting for the defence of India against Hitler [or Japan]. He fought because in northern India, especially, there was a strong tradition of serving the British; and because of the culture of honour, *izzat*. Because of the land system, a small property was able to support only one son, so there was a culture of younger sons joining government service, the army or police. They got two square meals a day, pay, pensions, and were honoured and respected members of their community. Their whole history was one of service, for the Moguls and so forth, and was not anything to be ashamed of.

Following the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the Indian Army expanded thirteen-fold from its peacetime strength of 185,000 to nearly 2,500,000. This soon resulted in the 'milking' of experienced officers and NCOs from existing units to provide replacements in the Indian units fighting in the Middle East (from 1940 onwards), and in training centres to train the hugely expanded Indian Army. Thousands of Indian soldiers, along with their British officers, were captured by the Japanese in Malaya, and so were not available to fight in Burma. For this reason many Indian units in the early years of the campaign in Burma were not well trained or led; hence the censure levelled at these units by some of the voices in this book

Readers familiar with the 1957 film *Bridge on the River Kwai* will not find accounts of experiences on the Burma-Thailand Railway in this book, which focuses on the fighting in the Burma campaign. The 61,000 Allied prisoners of war who formed part of the workforce on the

railway were captured in the earlier Malaya and Netherlands East Indies campaigns. They were hugely outnumbered by around 270,000 impressed labourers from Malaya, Thailand and the Netherlands East Indies. Prisoners of war taken by the Japanese in Burma were sent to Rangoon Jail.

What this book does capture is what it was like to fight in the demanding terrain and climate of Burma; and, from the British perspective, to be confronted by the most formidable soldiers encountered by anyone in the Second World War – the Japanese.

Julian Thompson, June 2009

Introduction

Those who fought in Burma have never denigrated the courage of the Japanese soldier, airman or sailor. It can be argued that our nation has never fought such a tenacious, vicious and brave foe.

The 14th Army, the largest Allied Army of World War II, was built of many races and religions. It produced the leadership, spirit and courage to win and delivered the greatest defeat on land in the history of the Japanese nation.

I am a supporter of oral history as it brings the past to life and alerts the senses to the action of the moment. *Forgotten Voices of Burma* does just that. Julian Thompson, a proven battle commander himself, demonstrates in the cross section of those talking to us what it was like to fight, live and die in Burma. Duty, valour, selflessness, endurance, improvisation and above all comradeship capture the reader.

During the campaign I know my father met and spoke with many we hear from. He was so proud of these men and women of Burma. Some have since died but those who survive today, together with many from the Commonwealth and other Allies in that great army with its air forces and navies, still meet to continue their unique comradeship, and give help to those in need, through the Burma Star Association. Let us not forget there are also over 30,000 who still lie in Burma and very many more in Assam in the war cemeteries of Imphal and Kohima.

I wish Julian Thompson success with *Forgotten Voices of Burma*, and trust that our young men and women read, learn and realise that they owe much in their daily life to the generation who ensured their freedom today.

The Rt Hon The Viscount Slim

August 2009

Retreat



The Japs fought with great ferocity and courage. We were arrogant about the Japs, we regarded them as coolies. We thought of them as third rate. My goodness me, we soon changed our tune.

ON 14 DECEMBER 1941, the Japanese captured Victoria Point on the southern tip of Burma. By this time the Japanese had invaded Hong Kong and Malaya. Hong Kong fell on Christmas Day 1941, and Singapore on 15 February 1942. A month before the fall of Singapore, the Japanese had seized airfields in the Kra Isthmus of Burma, at Mergui, Victoria Point and Tavoy. Following this, the Japanese Fifteenth Army, consisting of the 33rd and 55th Divisions, deployed in Siam (now Thailand), were waiting for the moment to advance to seize Rangoon when their campaign in Malaya neared completion.

Originally the garrison of Burma had consisted of two British battalions, four locally recruited battalions of Burma Rifles, and six battalions of the Burma Frontier Force. The first priority of these troops was internal security, to contain dissent among the Burmese (or Burmans). During 1941, the troop level was increased by raising more battalions of the Burma Rifles, forming the 1st Burma Division, and shipping in two Indian infantry brigades.

The Burma Rifles had consisted exclusively of Karens, Kachins and Chins, with British officers; the Burmans were considered unfit for military service, as being neither loyal nor martial enough. Although, under political pressure, some were recruited when

the Burma Rifles was expanded, most proved unreliable and even treacherous when subjected to the test of battle.

The Japanese invasion found Burma defended by the 1st Burma Division and 17th Indian Division, under the overall command of Lieutenant General J. T. Hutton. He sent the 1st Burma Division to central Burma to cover the routes in from the east from the Mekong Valley, along the Burma-Indo-China border. Major General 'Jackie' Smyth's 17th Indian Division was ordered to hold the line of the Salween River and cover Rangoon.

The battle for Burma was lost on 23 February 1942, early in the campaign, at the disaster at the Sittang River, when the British demolished the only bridge too early, leaving half their soldiers on the wrong side. This was followed by the longest fighting retreat in the history of the British Army, 1,100 miles, ending on 10 May when the British withdrew into Assam over the Chindwin River in north-east Burma. If properly defended, the Sittang position would have provided a good chance to impose a serious delay on the Japanese, and buy time for more British reinforcements to arrive in Burma. The battle was lost by attempting to hold too far forward, and underestimating the enemy. The confusion was made worse by pitting inexperienced troops against some of the best soldiers in the world.

INVASION AND DISASTER

Major General John 'Jackie' Smyth
GOC, 17th Indian Division

Hutton was out of his element as a battlefield commander in Burma. When Alexander arrived to take over, it was too late. Had he been there earlier, the Prime Minister of Australia might not have refused to send the two Australian divisions to Burma. Also, the Sittang disaster might not have occurred.

In early December, I was told by Wavell, then C-in-C India, that two of my brigades were being sent to Singapore, which came as a great shock to me. I was to go to Burma with my one remaining brigade plus two new ones. Wavell did not give the impression that he thought there was any threat to Burma at all.

Lieutenant Anthony Dillon

1st Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment

My battalion was stationed on Mingaladon airfield, near Rangoon. There was no threat as far as we could tell. The war was a long way away, and there was a feeling of apathy. The amount of training we did before the Japanese invaded Burma was minimal, we were an Internal Security battalion; and there was a considerable amount of unrest in Burma.



The Japanese enter Tavoy in southern Burma on 19 January 1942, greeted by Burmese inhabitants who saw the invasion as an opportunity to gain independence from British rule.

We were badly equipped, signalling by heliograph or line. We had few vehicles, our mortars and machine-guns were carried on mules. We were unfit for modern war. In the days just before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, a lot of US aid came in by sea to Rangoon and was taken up to China up the Burma Road. When the Japs bombed Rangoon, the Chinese abandoned the vehicles and equipment in the docks and we helped ourselves to all this stuff.

Private Neville Hogan

2nd Battalion, Burma Rifles Armoured Car Section

I am a Karen and lived in Rangoon, where my father worked as a shipping manager. Before the war I joined the Burma Auxiliary Force, Rangoon Battalion. In order to join,

I lied about my age, showing the recruiting sergeant my elder brother's birth certificate.

Most Burmese civilians were anti-British. They wanted independence. The Karens, the Chins and Shans liked the British. The Burma army pre-war was mostly Karen.

In December 1941 I was a private soldier at Mingaladon Airfield with the Armoured Car Section of the 2nd Burma Rifles. The Japanese bombed us on Christmas Day. No one was killed or wounded, but two out of four of our so-called armoured cars had shrapnel holes in them. We then witnessed Rangoon being drained of the civilian population. The people, mainly Indians, walked past Mingaladon, which was about twelve miles out of Rangoon; the City was a ghost town. My mother and sister left at this time and went to north Burma and eventually into India.

Corporal William Norman

Mortar Platoon, 2nd Battalion, Duke of Wellington's Regiment

My battalion was in Peshawar training for operations on the North-West Frontier when the Japanese invaded Malaya. I was a bandsman. I remember saying to the RSM that we ought to be training for jungle warfare to fight the Japs in Malaya. In January 1942, all sorts of equipment started to arrive; we were still equipped as the British army had been in 1918. We got Bren guns, mortars. We had never fired a mortar. I was in the mortar platoon, formed from the band. We got radios, which no one knew how to work.



SR 12342

Neville Hogan, as a lieutenant later in the war.

In late January we went by train to Madras. We were all excited and glad to be getting into the war at last. We embarked on a ship, and noticed that the ship was going east so we thought we were going to Malaya. We started to train on our new weapons, we all fired two rounds from the Boyes anti-tank rifle. We arrived at Rangoon to be greeted with the news that Singapore had fallen. We were amazed to see that the Burmese were not Indian, but Asiatic. We knew nothing about the place.

Mrs Margaret ('Beth') Bootland

Wife of RSM 1st Battalion, King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry

Alan and I, with our five-year-old son Ian, lived in the sergeant major's house at Maymyo, where the battalion was stationed. Although the war against Germany had been going on for a couple of years, to begin with we never thought the war would affect us. But one day Alan said that the Americans were getting worried about the Japanese. We listened to the news on the wireless, and when we heard about Pearl Harbor, we knew we were in for it.

One Sunday morning after an early game of tennis I was in the bath. I heard a roar of planes, stood up in the bath, peeped through the net curtains. I saw the palm trees waving, thought it's only a strong wind, and sat back in the bath. I heard Alan running up the path shouting, 'Where are you, Beth?'

I replied, 'I'm in the bath.'

He told me, 'Get out quick, it is an air raid.'

He pounded upstairs shouting, 'Get out, get out.'

I jumped out of the bath, had a quick rub with the towel and tried to pull my panties on, and the Celanese material stuck to my wet legs. Try as I could I couldn't get them on.

He asked me what I was doing, and I said, 'I can't get my panties on.'

He said, 'Come out, put on my big army greatcoat which I have got here, grab your clothes off the chair.'

As soon as I was out, he asked where Ian was, and I told him that he was away somewhere on his cycle with his friends. Alan went off to find him. The gravel hurt my bare feet as I ran down the drive in Alan's greatcoat, holding my clothes, making for the slit trench in the garden. Each slit trench in the married quarters area had an armed soldier in it. I told the one in mine to turn his back while I dressed. To my relief, Ian eventually arrived.

The quarters were full because the Gloucestershire families had been evacuated from Rangoon, which had not been captured yet, but had been bombed. I had to go round all the families to find out how many pregnant women there were, so the army knew how many would require evacuation by air.

Major Charles MacFetridge

Officer Commanding 3rd Indian Light Anti-Aircraft Battery

On arrival at Rangoon we found the docks deserted because the Japs had bombed the docks on Christmas Day. We found a good assembly area about fifteen miles outside Rangoon near Mingaladon airfield. I deployed two troops to defend the airfield, and one troop moved by rail and boat over the river Salween to Moulmein.

On the last day of January I decided to pay the troop at Moulmein a visit, as a boost to morale. I thought Japs were still well to the south in Tenassarim. While I was travelling in a Tiger Moth with the soldiers' pay in a bag, the pilot indicated that he had been recalled to base at Rangoon, telling me that the Japs had overrun Moulmein. So I had four guns on the wrong side of the mighty Salween River. In the confused fighting there I lost all four guns.

Private Neville Hogan

2nd Battalion, Burma Rifles Armoured Car Section

At the end of January, the armoured car section was ordered to go to the south of Burma on the road to Martaban and Moulmein. On 19 February 1942 (my brother's birthday, which is why I can remember the date) we were ambushed in a roadblock nine miles north of Martaban. The leading car crashed through the roadblock. I was in the second car. We came around the bend in the

road to see the enemy, who had been sitting on the trees forming the roadblock, shoot to their feet in surprise. They turned out to be Thai soldiers, forced by Japs to fight us. We opened fire as did they. They were using small calibre armour-piercing bullets, which came straight through our armour. I was wounded in the right thigh. We were not expecting to be ambushed, as far as we were concerned the war was on the other side of the bay, twelve miles away. Our armoured cars were First World War vintage, and the bullets jammed the turret preventing it from training round. We backed up the road, round the bend out of sight, and the Thais did not follow up.

We then fought a rearguard action all the way to the Sittang Bridge. We were bombed three times by Blenheim bombers of the RAF, despite standing in the paddy fields waving to them.

Second Lieutenant John Randle

Officer Commanding B Company, 7th/10th Baluch Regiment

I was a newly commissioned second lieutenant commanding a company. We arrived in the middle of an air raid at Rangoon, and moved by train to lower Burma in the general area east of the Sittang and west of the Salween. The part we went to was rubber, not jungle, and we were used to the vast open plains of our training area in India. I like trees, but, in rubber plantations, with no horizon, it is a bit depressing and confining.

The Japs had barely started their offensive; we guarded bridges, then deployed on the west bank of the Salween, before pulling back to Kuzeik on the River Salween opposite Pa-an. The Salween is broader than the Rhine at this point. The brigade was dispersed. Our role was to hold the waterfront at Kuzeik, and we established company

patrol bases to try to identify if and when the Japanese crossed the river, at which point the brigade reserve battalion would come up from Thaton and drive the Japanese back into the Salween. The positions had been dug by 1st/7th Gurkhas, concentrating on holding the river front and hadn't been developed as a perimeter to face an attack from the west. Because we had two companies out in bases, and one holding the front, the perimeter facing west was practically non-existent. Because the perimeter was so shallow our own mortars and the two mountain guns in support could not fire on our own front.

The 1st/7th Gurkhas had already given the 215th Regiment a bloody nose at Pa-an, before being relieved by 7th/10th Baluch, but this did not deter this very battle-experienced Japanese Regiment, experts in night attacks.

Corporal William Norman

Mortar Platoon, 2nd Battalion, Duke of Wellington's Regiment

We were deployed near the coast east of Rangoon, in case of a landing across the Gulf of Martaban. We were not there long, but did fire our mortars. A despatch rider came up and we were on the move again. The mortars and ammunition, 150 rounds per mortar, were on fifteen-hundredweight trucks, but we had to march. As we marched we got covered from head to foot in dust and were continually thirsty. Whenever I think of Burma I think of dust and thirst, not jungle, we were not in that part of Burma. Although there was some jungle, it was not continuous.

The motor transport sergeant came along and shouted 'anyone who can drive over here'. The motor transport had been issued and there weren't enough drivers. Some who volunteered couldn't even drive, they volunteered to get out of the marching and the dust. We were entrained at

Pegu and went across the Sittang River and to a place called Kyaikto. From there we travelled in trucks and took up a position in the village, where the villagers greeted us and gave us tea.

Second Lieutenant John Randle

Officer Commanding B Company, 7th/10th Baluch Regiment

A Company were in a patrol base at Myainggale, seven miles south of the battalion position. I was told to take over from A Company, and my Subedar, Mehr Khan, went off with one platoon as advance party. During the night the Japanese attacked and, as we learned subsequently, wiped out my platoon with Subedar Mehr Khan, and a platoon of A Company, the remainder of the company having already left. As I was moving to Myainggale with my remaining two platoons, I ran into the middle of 215 Regiment just getting across and taking up positions on the west bank of the Salween. I had a hairy old night, lost a few chaps, but managed to get my two platoons out back to the main position. The visibility was quite good, in banana plantations, and, with the full moon you could see about fifty yards, it was so light you threw a moon shadow. The CO had not laid down routes for my company and A company to move on, in order to avoid a clash, and I was worried about having a shoot-out with them. A Company were to move, leaving one platoon under Subedar Mehr Khan of B Company as soon as he arrived. We were in single file one platoon leading, followed by Company HQ, and the other platoon, when a man charged in to our column. I thought it was one of my soldiers running away, and shouted at him. It was a Jap who ran off into the bush. A couple of Japs were shot by my men, the first dead Jap I had seen. There was quite a lot of firing, and I realised there were quite a lot of Japs about. I tried to get through

on my radio, which didn't work. So I sent my runner, the company bugler, back with a message to my CO to tell him there were a lot of Japs about. They cut in behind us and we could hear the runner screaming as they killed him with swords and bayonets. This was followed by an enormous lot of firing a couple of miles away from the base we were going to relieve. The Japs were running about, in a fair state of confusion too, having just come across the river. We had no idea what tactics we should adopt. I just formed a circle which, looking back, was the best thing to do: river on one side, Japs on two sides. It was pure luck, not cleverness. It was clear to me there were a considerable number of Japs to the south of me, so I decided to return to the battalion position. I only lost a couple of chaps. Luckily I picked a route where there were no Japs and got back OK.

Corporal William Norman

Mortar Platoon, 2nd Battalion, Duke of Wellington's Regiment

In the morning a lot of fire came from our right flank, and we heard that a Burma Rifle battalion had all pushed off in a panic. We were ordered to withdraw. We didn't think much of this, we had not seen the Japs yet. As we were marching through high elephant grass a lot of aircraft came over and there was an argument about which type they were. The fellows just out from England who were 'experts', said they were Hurricanes. The planes circled and started diving down. We thought they were going to give the Japs hell. They weren't Hurricanes and they started to give us hell. We withdrew into a rubber plantation. All the trees were in lines. As we heard the planes diving in, the men tried to hide behind the trees in a long line. Actually the aircraft were RAF attacking our transport on the road.