



### INTRODUCTION BY GENERAL SIR PETER WALL



I have very little personal experience of Burma or the people who fought in the Burma Campaign. I was however very fortunate, during a formal visit to the Indian Army, to be taken to Kohima, in Assam and close to India's border with Myanmar, formerly Burma.

The topography in Assam serves as a metaphor for the intense collision of two huge armies: like two tectonic plates forcing the ground upwards

and defining the scarps and ridges over which decisive battles were so fiercely fought.

Standing on the tennis court in Kohima looking out over that landscape, with only the slightest understanding of the horrendous deprivations endured by both sides, made me think about the staggering resilience of the human spirit, embodied by 14th Army and those who are entitled to wear the Burma Star.

Some historians have referred to Kohima as the 'Stalingrad of the East', and to the fighting there as 'mindless savagery'; it was as intense as any combat experienced by the British Armies in either World War, overlaid with shortages of food, water, ammunition and medical supplies that made survival utterly precarious. The Japanese were as tenacious as they were ruthless. Yet Field Marshal Slim had, through sheer force of leadership, created an Army interspersed with British, Indian, Nepali and African regiments that had the morale, resolve, strength and cohesiveness to defeat them. 14th Army fought the enemy into a retreat from which they could not recover. That small piece of battlespace marked the turning point for Japan's war to dominate South East Asia.

The regiments who won the battle at Kohima were of course representative of the whole of Slim's Army, many of whom fought throughout the longest running campaign of the war from 1941-45, enduring a series of defeats before the tide turned.

Terrain and climate had as great an impact on the campaign as the skill and ferocity of the enemy. Lack of infrastructure put a heavy premium on military engineering and the building of improvised airfields, bridges and roads and tracks which could be linked to the railway network. Monsoon rains limited operations to six months of the year, and famine and disease significantly impeded the tempo and progress of the campaign. Phenomenal determination was required to overcome these extreme conditions and bring fighting power to bear. There was a high reliance on engineers and logisticians and a premium on ingenuity and improvisation. Allied airlift, including a significant US contribution, also played a critical role in sustaining ground operations.



The ebb and flow of the campaign across the coastal plains and river valleys, through the tropical forests and mountains called for incessant attention to roads and bridges. Entire divisions provided the labour, under technical supervision of their engineers, to drive routes through extreme terrain by brute force and take the fight to the enemy. Bridges and ferry crossings were at best tenuous and susceptible to being washed away in the rising waters of the monsoon. Sustaining

mobility was a huge effort for 14th Army throughout the campaign, and it depended heavily on the Sapper contribution.

It is tremendous to see the Burma Star Memorial Fund keeping the memory of the 'Forgotten Army,' and all that it stood for, alive. It is also fitting that recent Burma Star Scholars have studied Engineering for Global Development, in recognition, perhaps, of the importance of terrain and environment to human endeavour.

## LETTER FROM LOTENNA OLISAELOKA



I write to thank you for offering me this year's Burma Star Scholarship to study at the Institute for Global Health (IGH). Getting the congratulatory call from Mr Jeremy Archer was a life-changing moment, which has now set me on my journey to becoming a global health leader. I am a medical doctor and public health researcher from Nigeria, keenly interested in innovative and transformative global health research, policy development and programme management aimed at improving the health of people and communities globally. Treating critically-ill COVID-19 patients and doing research on the impacts of the pandemic on my country's health system made me realise the need for an inter-sectoral approach in health system management and motivated my application to UCL.

Thanks to your very generous donation, I am currently studying for an MSc in Global Health and Development. I chose this programme because of its intense focus on intersectoral collaboration and IGH's diversity-conscious teaching and research. My expectations have been surpassed. In my cohort, there's everybody from everywhere and every background; a fellow doctor from Indonesia; an English teacher from the USA; a bio-scientist from France; a pharmacist from Iran; and the list goes on. The diversity in culture and educational background – along with the rich curriculum – has been a wonderful opportunity to share experiences and understand global health through multiple lenses.

The programme has been intense but rewarding – despite it being my first time living outside Nigeria – thanks to the wonderful academic and administrative staff at IGH and my very friendly and welcoming cohort. I have been able to settle into UCL and London quite nicely and, through the UCL Student Union, I am about to undertake amazing volunteer work as a Mental Health Support worker with the NHS. I have also been in contact with previous Burma Star Scholars, Akaraseth and Kushma (centre and left respectively in the photograph above), and I am excited to get to know them better and also to share in Akaraseth's experiences from the COP26.

The Burma Star Scholarship means the world to me as neither myself nor my family had the funds to sponsor my studies at UCL. I am deeply motivated by the recognition and trust of the Burma Star Memorial Fund and I am working hard at my studies and building connections to ensure that I get the most out of this opportunity. My objective is to be a world-leading global health researcher and policy expert. Hence, on completing my MSc, I intend to undertake my PhD and thereafter employ my research competencies by working with global health institutions focused on health systems strengthening in low- and middle-income countries like my own.

## VETERAN'S CORNER: 265871 MAJOR CHARLES MERCER



Charles Mercer, who was born on 14 November 1919, explained: 'Following three months' basic training at the Sussex Regiment Depot in Chichester, I was selected for officer training. After marrying in Brighton on 29 May 1943, we only had sufficient time for a ten-day, war-time 'honeymoon' before, completely out of the blue, I was posted to Nigeria. Although I was a bit surprised, I accepted it as a war-time need. After sailing to Lagos, I made my way to Kaduna, where I joined X Company, 7th Battalion, Nigeria Regiment (7 NR), which was part of 3rd (West African) Infantry Brigade. I was given command of 16 Platoon, which comprised thirty young Nigerian soldiers. They were mostly from the north of the country and were of the Moslem faith. Many of them looked extremely fierce, with tribal markings on their faces, formed by cuts made when they were quite young. To begin with, though, I could hardly recognise one from another while we couldn't speak a word of one another's language either. Fortunately, within the Battalion, there were officers who had been District Officers before the war so were fluent in Hausa, the language used by all the Nigerian battalions. The soldiers were a happy bunch and enjoyed their training. We lived in the open in all weather conditions, practising ambushes, attacks, river-crossings and careful movement, all the while carrying 70 lb packs on our backs. The Nigerians met all these challenges with great ability and fortitude. Under the Chindit organisation, 7 NR was divided into two columns: there were sixty mules per column and we brought all our heavy equipment with us. You can imagine the fun getting the mules into the aircraft – the best fun was had by those watching! Landing soldiers deep behind the Japanese lines for the first time was both mentally and physically demanding.

The Nigerians were most impressive: very well-disciplined and extremely alert. 13 April 1944 was a day that no-one in 7 NR would ever forget. A four-platoon company set off, with 16 Platoon leading. From 1100 hrs to 1500 hrs, the battle continued, at varying intensities. The Nigerians attacked with fixed bayonets, shouting in their native tongues, with deep tribal markings showing on their faces. It must have been a frightening sight for the Japanese. Six *Dakotas* took out our heavy equipment and we evacuated 'White City' without further losses, which was extraordinary, really.' At the end of the war, 7 NR 'sailed back to Nigeria, where the Battalion was disbanded. You can imagine the difficulty in saying farewell. We had been together for a very long time and had been through so much. The most important memory of those war years for me is the wonderful comradeship I enjoyed with my fellow Europeans but particularly with the very splendid Nigerians. I had the same orderly throughout the war, Yeli Mundu. He saved my life on a number of occasions and also survived, thank goodness for that. In the early 1950s, I went back to Nigeria as a staff officer in the Headquarters. The great joy was that I managed to see some of my old soldiers, in particular Sergeant Umoro Numan, who was awarded an MM and was now RSM of the 1st Battalion. He came south to see me and we had a long chat, with my young son sitting on his knee.'