INDIAN AIRBORNE REMINISCENCES

BY

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PART I—AN R.M.O. IN IMPHAL

"Red light on"... the Dakota vibrated as it lost speed for its run in and, with the sandbanks receding beneath us, the dropping zone came into view through the open door. The ground chosen for the landing was a narrow tongue caught between the icy waters of the Kabul River and the Indus where they converged just above the fort at Attock. It was January and the night was cold, but a half-moon lit the scene as the men gradually assembled at the rendezvous. Within an hour of landing the Battalion was complete again, thus performing an operation quickly by night which, the new Divisional Commander stated, they had been trying unsuccessfully to perform at home for some time. This drop was Phase 1 of the final exercise for Operation "Eagle," which was obviously to be for a combined assault at the beginning of 1944 somewhere down the Arakan Coast. Before Phase 2 could be started all aircraft were withdrawn, leaving the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade virtually high and dry. It was a terrible anticlimax and life appeared to hold nothing more than another hot weather training period in Campbellpur. Shortly afterwards we heard we were to go on advanced jungle training to Kohima. Where was Kohima? After scrutinizing our atlases it appeared to be a small Naga town, miles from the Japanese.

The Brigade, less the 154th Gurkha Battalion which was remaining to complete its air training, left Campbellpur, N. Punjab, on February 24, by rail for Calcutta, which was reached four days later. As notice of departure had been rather sudden, the second dose of cholera vaccine had to be given during train halts. After leaving Calcutta on the 28th the Field Service Area was entered, this change being immediately noticeable by the fact that all the Indian Civilian train staff were in khaki, and one drew "batta."

After a journey of twelve hours the riverhead at Sirajganj Ghat was reached. From this point there was an overnight journey in a river paddle steamer to Tistamukh, where, for some unknown reason, it was necessary to change into another steamer. Two days were spent in this one, basking in the sun, moving slowly up the broad Brahmaputra. Riverhead was reached at Pandi, where we disembarked at the same time as an American-trained Chinese battalion destined for the Ledo Road. The metre gauge Assam Railway was in the throes of reorganization, as it had just been taken over by the Americans, so it took nearly a day to reach Dimapur, the railhead, where the night was spent in the transit camp. Next day, packed like sardines in three-tonners, the remaining 40 miles to Kohima were covered by free

1Major-General E. E. Down, C.B.E.
2Field Service Allowance of one rupee per diem.
running M.T. along the first part of the Manipur Road: the remainder of the distance to the Brigade’s camp at Chakabama, 10 miles east of Kohima, was completed on foot. Here the 1st Battalion, Assam Regiment at Jessami came under command, while 50th Brigade came under the 23rd Indian Division who were in the 4th Indian Corps.

Within a week the 152nd Indian Battalion had moved to a position at “Sheldon’s Corner” south-east of Ukhrul. About this time rumours of more than normal Japanese movements, in the Tiddim area, began to circulate. Our Intelligence Officer who attended a divisional conference came back to explain that it was just the normal seasonal movements. At midnight on March 16 we had orders to move by 0600 hours the following morning, so we packed all night, but at 6 a.m. were told to stand down at four hours’ notice. Not until the morning of March 19 did we have orders to move, when with full scales of equipment the 50th Brigade, less the 152nd Battalion and 1st Battalion Assam Regiment, marched the 10 miles up three and a half thousand feet to Kohima. Here the Brigade was met by M.T. and driven the remaining 80 miles of the Manipur Road to reach Imphal at dusk. Everything was in chaos—the transit camp, where we were to have fed and spent the night, had moved. Rumours flew thick and fast—the Manipur Road was cut. This we knew was not true as we had just come down it. We did not know it, but all Sisters and other women’s organizations had been motored out that afternoon. There was nothing else to do but dig in and await orders. Almost immediately one company was ordered up to Ukhrul, where rumours had it that the 152nd Battalion was in difficulties. Next morning we heard the incredible news that the two leading companies of the 152nd had been overrun. . . . Where had the Japs come from? If “I” was correct, they should be some hundred miles the other side of the Chindwin. The situation was roughly comparable to a Londoner being told that the Germans had appeared in Tonbridge and not by parachute either. The 153rd Gurkha Battalion was allotted twenty 15-cwt. Dodges to get as many men as possible up to Ukhrul. The Battalion “O” group, the two remaining rifle companies and a platoon of mortars, were transported some miles into the hills to the site where the 49th Indian Brigade had been prior to their withdrawal to the Imphal Plain. This was on a riverbed about 6 miles short of Ukhrul and completely indefensible. An uneasy night was spent there hearing firing and watching flames from Ukhrul where our leading company was destroying food dumps and stores. On the following day 50th Brigade H.Q. decided to prepare a defensive position on the neighbouring Sangshak Plateau where there were twin Naga villages. Tactically it commanded the road junction at “Finch’s Corner” and had a prepared two-company position in which were the Kalibahadurs—a Nepalese State Force Unit. The disadvantage was that water came from four seepage wells which were all outside the perimeter. Here 50th Brigade H.Q., 153rd Battalion and 80th Indian Field Ambulance concentrated, while Rear Brigade H.Q. with “B” Echelon of units remained at Litan at the crossing of the Toubal river. Next day the remnants of the 152nd Battalion, and the rear party of 49th Indian Brigade
consisting of the 4th/5th Mahrattas and batteries of each of the 9th Mountain Regiment I.A., and the 128th Jungle Field Regiment R.A., came in. Almost immediately the Japanese attacked violently and bedlam ensued. Renegade Indian troops with them were shouting "Cease Fire" in English, Urdu and Gurkhali, while British Officers were shouting even ruder things in reply. The village just outside the forward rifle company caught fire, and it was touch and go whether the company would have to retire, but at the critical moment the wind changed. The total perimeter was so small that the Battalion R.A.P. shared a flat piece of ground, about the size of a badminton court, with a section of mortars. However, the attack was beaten off. Every night the Japanese attacked, but were quiet during the day. All supplies were short, particularly water. Attempts were made to air supply, but the dropping was bad. It was maddening to watch two-thirds of the supply containers falling into the Japanese hands. On the fifth night, after a particularly heavy attack, the Japanese broke into the perimeter, and it was only after six hours of savage hand-to-hand fighting that they were thrown out. The position was now desperate—of 25 British officers in the 152nd Battalion who had gone jungle training to Ukhrul some fortnight before only 2 were unwounded and 18 had been killed. Water was gone, and there was no sign of relief. That evening just before stand to the news came... That night the action was to be broken off and the Brigade was to retire to Imphal, some thirty miles away as the crow flies but many times that distance by the tortuous jungle tracks. About midnight the Brigade broke up into small parties carrying their own wounded, some of whom took ten days to reach Imphal. Arriving on the Imphal Plain, it was found that the north-east approaches were now blocked by the 5th Indian Division which had been flown in from Arakan. Rear H.Q. had managed skilfully to extricate itself with comparatively little loss, from being encircled at Litan, and had withdrawn through the 5th Division.

The Brigade now reorganized in "Catfish" Box near 4 Corps Keep. Apart from its casualties, all its heavy stores had been destroyed at Kohima, while those of "B" Echelon had gone up in flames at Litan. Here an observer from the Directorate of Air at G.H.Q.(I) arrived to confirm the rumours which had been filtering back to India regarding the fate of the Brigade. From now on we were to be kept very much on ice as there were practically no paratroop reinforcements in India. Brigade H.Q. took over three unattached Battalions to form a new Brigade. The 152nd Battalion awaited reinforcements, while the surgical team was sent to Bishenpur. One section of the Field Ambulance, attached to the 1st Battalion Assam Regiment, withdrew with them to Kohima and went through the siege there, while another was to be later parachuted, on to the lines of communication of Wingate's Force (3 Ind. Div.), to act as a medical staging post.

At the beginning of April Imphal was surrounded, while very bitter fighting was taking place at Kohima. During the middle of April the 153rd Battalion moved from "Catfish" Box to "Oyster" Box on the Imphal perimeter defences, where we came under the 17th Indian Division—"The
Indian Airborne Reminiscences

Black Cats.” Shortly afterwards we moved to the village of Sengmi, the most forward defended locality along the Manipur Road. At the beginning of May the Battalion came once again under the 23rd Indian Division and took over Nunsigum, a hill which commanded the north-eastern airstrip on the Imphal Plain. This hill marked the flood tide of the Japanese advance. From here, some three weeks previously, they had been flung off by the 1st/17th Dogras supported by tanks of the 3rd Carabiniers. The latter had advanced single file up a knife-edged spur along which it was impossible to turn—climbing nearly a thousand feet in about twelve hundred yards—a manoeuvre which was almost certainly in no Tank Manual of instruction. The Battalion remained there for nearly a month receiving some 80 reinforcements, and during this time the monsoon broke. At the beginning of June, we moved across the valley to the feature running up to the Mung Ching, coming then under the 20th Indian Division. From here a column was sent into the Naga Hills, to be followed up eventually by the whole Battalion. At the beginning of August 1944, following the complete rout of the Japanese, the Battalion returned to India for further training in its normal rôle.

CLIMATIC CONDITIONS AND TERRAIN

Imphal Plain in the Manipur State forms a plateau about eight hundred square miles and two and a half thousand feet above sea-level. It is surrounded by hills averaging four to six thousand feet in height, through which escape the four main roads, one from each corner of the plain, and it was at these exits that most of the fighting took place.

The cold nights of February necessitated battle-dress being worn, although drill was sufficient during the day. There followed a short hot weather spell from the middle of March to the middle of May, when the monsoon broke. (The annual rainfall at Cherrapunji is over 400 inches a year, the majority during the monsoon.) Fortunately a break in the clouds about every forty-eight hours gave the sun a chance to shine through and made it possible to dry all clothing and equipment. Humidity during the rains was high in the plains, but low in the hills. During the monsoon a great deal of the plain, being paddy, was under water.

REGIMENTAL MEDICAL ORGANIZATION AND MEDICAL SERVICES

The R.M.O. had at his disposal a medical section of one Havildar and sixteen Riflemen who were trained in first aid and both water and sanitary duties. The main bulk of medical equipment was at Battalion H.Q., but each medical rifleman, with the companies, carried a platoon medical haversack and a stretcher or carrying sheet. The Battalion was definitely "hygiene conscious," and, after two years of continuous cross-country exercises, were well versed in the art of mess-tin cookery, foraging, individual water sterilization and first aid.

Immunization was given against smallpox, typhoid, paratyphoid, tetanus and cholera; reinoculation for the latter being repeated every four months.

Evacuation of casualties was through the nearest Field Ambulance and,
from there, back to Imphal. Here there were four I.B.G.H. and three C.C.S., each one admitting daily in turn. As all Q.A. and I.M.N.S. Sisters had been evacuated, and as most of the Field Regiments and the one Medium Regiment, were sited in close juxtaposition, they were not ideal places in which to nurse patients, so that, when possible, all patients were flown out within forty-eight hours.

**Equipment**

(a) *W.E.T. or A.F.G.1098.*—This was on altogether too lavish a scale. In fact, when the Battalion was on a manpack basis, it was impossible to carry all the allotted appliances. Stretchers then used were of a collapsible bamboo type which had been designed for use on the North-West Frontier. They were not a great success as the bamboo broke under heavy work. In the hills, carrying sheets were the most useful form of carrying appliances. They folded up small and could be strapped on the back of a pack, and bamboo runners could quickly be cut locally for them. Their disadvantage was that a Thomas splint with suspension bar could not be attached. Stretcher slings were also invaluable for getting wounded away “pick-a-back” off steep hill sides.

(b) *M.M.E. or A.F.I.1248.*—This was also, on too lavish a scale, particularly with surgical instruments. Medical supplies arrived in bulk and had to be broken down into scrounged cigarette tins and lotion bottles to fit into the various manpacks and haversacks. This was an extremely wasteful method as medical supplies, unless properly bottled or tinned, deteriorated rapidly, particularly under monsoon conditions. This point is particularly stressed by Young (1947). What is required is a light-weight waterproof metal container, the size of a pack, which opens out so that any particular drug or instrument may be removed without the whole pack having to be emptied out on to the ground. It would be in the nature of a large “Burroughs Wellcome” first-aid box. The Germans and Italians had such equipment—specimens are to be seen at the exhibition of captured enemy equipment at the F.T.C., Chatham.

(c) *Small Arms.*—At Sangshak each medical rifleman, apart from his personal and medical equipment, had to carry a Sten gun, a hundred rounds of ammunition and two hand grenades. The result was that, to all intents and purposes, he was immobile, unless, when stretcher-bearing, he dumped his arms—thereby leaving himself unarmed in emergencies. Apart from the implications of the Geneva Convention, this armament appeared irrational, particularly when it is considered that No. 1 of a mortar section was not expected to carry a Sten as well as the mortar barrel. When the Battalion reorganized at Imphal, the opportunity was taken to rearm the whole medical section with revolvers only. This question, however, was never settled, and during later preparations for further operations in the Far East, a return from revolvers to Stens was being made.

This was recognized for mepacrine, and each soldier was eventually issued with a proper screw-top container, as previously unless he was very careful whenever it rained his mepacrine tablets became an amorphous mass.
CLOTHING

Our arrival in this area coincided with the change from khaki drill to jungle green battledress. The blouse of the latter was most unsatisfactory as it nearly always shrank; leaving a gap above the trousers in the middle of the back, on which the bottom of the pack rubbed. This was later remedied by a change to bush shirts. Long sleeves and trousers, apart from the anti-mosquito protection, were instrumental in reducing the incidence of I.A.T. Incidentally, long sleeves and trousers help enormously in reducing the difference in appearance of white and dark troops. Socks at this time were
most unsatisfactory—reissues being the only ones available, the feet of which had been repaired with some sort of string material. They shrunk immediately on becoming wet and the heel was always somewhere under the instep—not particularly pleasant on long marches. During periods when the feet were almost continuously wet, the old non-vanishing mosquito cream was found to be most useful as a foot salve. As grindery and dubbin were also in short supply, it was difficult to keep boots properly studded and supple. Short puttees were more effective than anklets in keeping the more persistent insects from one's stockinged feet.
The regulation equipment is too tight and awkward for complete freedom of movement on long hill marches. We dispensed with the cross braces; ammunition bandoliers were slung around the waist; the water bottle was attached to the two buckles at the back of the belt and everything else carried in the pack, slung as a rucksack. An earlier lesson might well have been learnt from the Assam Rifles—a frontier military police—who had for some years past been very suitably equipped in their slouch hats, bush jackets and rucksacks with water bottles attached, for operating as mobile columns in these parts.

**Personal Hygiene**

Laundry facilities were non-existent, but it was nearly always possible to have a bath in a stream about every ten days, following which the spare set of underclothing and drill was put on. The dirty clothing was then washed out and soon dried by the sun. Health inspections were carried out as often as possible and at least monthly. Although nominally for pediculosis and scabies, the chief lookout was for "jungle sores." These seldom developed due to the immediate first aid, which was given to all scratches, by the riflemen of the medical section attached to each company.

**Water Supplies**

The provision of water was no particular problem except in the hills. The methods used for sterilizing it were as follows:

(a) *For Patrolling.*—Riflemen were issued with water sterilizing outfits; if not available, recourse was made to superchlorination by the "master" water-bottle method.

(b) *For Static Purposes.*—R.E. water points were sited in each box, where the two-cistern method was employed, owing to the absence of any filtering equipment. Superchlorination was used, as there were no detasting tablets. Only rarely was alum available for sedimentation.

(c) *For Forward Units.*—Water was carried by mule pakhals and stored in cisterns of tarpaulins. Normally a five-day reserve was maintained in each perimeter area.

**Rations**

For the four months during which Imphal was besieged, all supplies were brought in by air. This resulted in an overall reduction in supplies so that rations, of necessity, had to be cut and many substitutes in the scale issued.

(1) *Individual Packs.*—Owing to the many ration scales in operation for the various classes of troops, there were as many individual packs available. When these packs were in short supply it was not always possible for the right pack to reach the right troops. In addition, troops fighting in the jungle, especially under adverse conditions, may have to use an individual pack for a considerably longer period than for which it was designed, and the longer this type of ration is in use the less palatable it becomes—some more quickly than others. Here the American "K" failed by its very specialization as its highly spiced processed foods palled rapidly. This criticism also applied to the Pacific ration. The Indian light-scale ration was of two varieties, milk or
fish, depending on the religion of the troops. This ration was awkward for
one man to cope with in one day. It contained a number of largish tins, the
contents of which were difficult to eat at a sitting, and which were eventually
difficult to dispose of without leaving a trace. If, on the other hand, the half-
consumed tin was put back in the pack it usually made a mess of it and
invariably attracted ants.

It always seemed a pity that the lines along which the original Indian
Paratroop ration—Shakapara biscuit, compressed raisin and cashew nut,
tea, sugar, dried milk, cigarettes, salt and a sweet made with an amaranth
basis—had been developed had been given up following the evidence of the
first Wingate expedition (1944). This ration, an early prototype of the
twenty-four-hour ration, was palatable, nutritive, of a high calorific value,
easily handled and could be eaten by troops of any Indian race, religion or
 caste, and finally whose packings were easily disposed of.

(2) "V" Force Rations.—These were packed in large drums and were not
complete rations, but rather supplements, which provided the trimmings, to
an otherwise monotonous diet of curry, for mobile columns based on local
villages. For their purpose, these rations were excellent.

(3) Field Service Scale.—Due to the ration cuts tinned food-stuffs were in
short supply; rice was issued in lieu of potatoes and Shakapara biscuits in
lieu of bread, so that troops who wouldn’t eat rice or biscuits must have
suffered a severe drop in calorific intake. The lesson here is that troops must
be accustomed to all types of food that are available in the country in which
they are operating.

Local supplies of fresh vegetables, eggs and chickens were available at
prohibitive prices from the Manipuris. Sometimes fresh meat could be obtained
from local cattle, and, in the hills, from the domesticated wild pigs and hill
cattle or mittaungs. For continual heavy hill climbing more than one ounce of
salt per day is required.

AMENITIES

To "go to town" in Imphal one had the choice of visiting the Canteen
Supply Depot (C.S.D.)—the equivalent of NAAFI—an Officers’ Shop, a Transit
Camp or the Y.M.C.A. All commodities were rationed and cigarettes were
unobtainable except for an issue of some thirty to forty a week, usually "Vs," but
sometimes as a special treat, "Woodbines." Newspapers were usually
some days late and arrived in batches, and consisted of the publications
"SEAC" and "Contact" of G.H.Q.(I). Noel Coward was the only ENSA
artist to visit us during the siege. We had no radio, but if one was really
hungry for news or dance music it was possible to tune the W.T. sets in to
the All India Radio Station at Calcutta; but the one most eagerly awaited
“amenity” was mail from home.

ACCOMMODATION

In Imphal and the surrounding villages troops were accommodated in
requisitioned Manipuri huts or the speedily erected bamboo bashas, but
elsewhere one lived for weeks underground in a “bunker,” furnished with
a roughly made bamboo bed. The two main problems here were to keep the "bunkers" dry during the monsoon and to prevent the excessive growth of fungi.

**Sanitation**

Latrines of the deep trench variety were used, and in the plains these had to be built up some three or four feet owing to the height of the subsoil water. Coverings for the men who squatted were made from bamboo, while the officers had sandbagged seats which were remarkably comfortable. Disposal of refuse and sullage followed accepted Army principles. Some units had very crude ideas of sanitation, as we found several times to our cost. For instance, at Sengmaii, where food, when served, became immediately black with flies, it was discovered that it had been a static installations' area, from which troops had withdrawn, before the Japanese, without closing their deep trench latrines. Again at Nunshigum, which we took over from a British battalion, who had been there some three weeks since the recapture of the hill from the Japanese, the stench was appalling and multitudes of green-bottle flies, with pink noses, were found to be breeding in the three to four hundred barely buried Japanese corpses. Following the excavation and burning of these bodies the flies virtually disappeared.

**Burials**

Christians and Mussalmans were buried on the spot if it was not practicable to remove their bodies by M.T. to their own central burial ground in Imphal. Hindus were burnt.

A difference in outlook between ourselves and Hindus is illustrated by the following incident. One day one of our officers whilst out walking with a Gurkha, passed the lonely grave of a British soldier high up on a hillside. The Gurkha remarked that the soldier's spirit must be very angry. On being asked why, he replied "As he cannot fly home."

**Health of Troops**

The Battalion left Calcutta at the end of February 1944 and returned there about five months later. It entered the Field Service Area with some thirty-five officers, British and Gurkha, and a strength of just under six hundred other ranks. At Sangshak it lost four officers killed, four wounded, thirty G.O.R.s killed and some hundred missing and wounded. During the siege of Imphal its casualties were one officer killed, three wounded, twenty G.O.R.s killed, thirty-eight wounded and twenty-two evacuated sick. These last figures represent battle casualties of 5 per 1,000 per week, and sick of 3 per 1,000 per week, and are particularly striking as the sick are less than the battle casualties—this during active monsoon operations.

The Battalion's time of arrival in this theatre was fortunate to coincide with the universal issue of mepacrine and the supply of sulphaguanidine down to R.M.O.s. It was also lucky not to have had to operate in a scrub typhus areas as D.B.P. or D.M.P. were not then available. Another worry was "jungle sores." These, however, were almost entirely prevented by
long sleeves and trousers which safeguarded against minor lesions, and immediate first aid, on the spot, was provided by the medical orderly in each platoon. The value of riflemen trained in medical duties with the leading platoons cannot be too highly stressed for the prevention of disease and the maintenance of morale, particularly in sub-units who are liable to operate isolated for days at a time in the jungle.

Antimalarial precautions were comprehensive, except for guards and patrols for whom face-nets and gauntlets were not then available. With Gurkhas there is not the difficulty experienced with British troops of getting them to take mepacrine. The reason is that as most of them have malaria as children, they were only too pleased to take anything which would prevent recrudescences of their old fever. Mosquito nets used were the little bush nets. At night before stand-to the tablet of mepacrine issued through "Q" channels was swallowed and mosquito cream applied while the medical orderlies would go round fitting the bunkers with pyrethrum (D.D.T. not then available). At that time the mosquito cream used was the vanishing variety.

When one was hot and sweaty it did not provide much protection, nor, in the low-lying parts, did the clothing prevent mosquitoes from biting through, particularly to the knees and elbows.

To conclude it is only fair to relate the epilogue, which could hardly have been bettered as a controlled experiment if one had wished to demonstrate the difference between a disciplined unit and a collection of individuals. Following the return of the Battalion to India in August, as most of the men had not had home leave for some three to four years because of the war, they were sent to Nepal on two and a half months' leave, which included a fortnight's travelling time. As from the railhead in British India, the Terai (a notorious malaria belt) and the foothills into Nepal had to be traversed on foot, each man was given ninety tablets of mepacrine. But when the Battalion began to reassemble in October it was heartbreaking to deal with sick parades of seventy, mostly fevers and "jungle sores" and to have some fifty in hospital with malaria, including cases of M.T. Yet within six weeks of returning to the fold, it was gratifying to see a fine unit rapidly regain its peak of physical efficiency.

REFERENCES

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PART II.—A NOTE ON THE FORMATION OF AIRBORNE FORCES IN INDIA

The 50th Indian Parachute Brigade which formed in Delhi Cantonment in October 1941 consisted of the 151st British, the 152nd Indian and the 153rd Gurkha Parachute Battalions. In addition, there was a British-Indian Brigade Signal Section as well as a Sapper Section from the Kirkee Sappers and Miners. These Battalions were composite ones which had been started
from scratch with volunteers from various sections of the British Army in India and the Indian Army. The Indian Battalion was the most interesting experiment, as it contained all races, creeds and castes. This had not previously been attempted and the experiment can hardly be counted as successful, for when the Airborne Division was eventually formed, the Battalion split into two—Hindu and Mussalman—by simple fission rather than by parthenogenesis. The British Battalion, first commanded by Lt.-Col. Martin Lindsay, D.S.O., of Greenland fame, went to the Middle East in 1942, where it was renumbered 156th, assisted in the occupation of Taranto by 1 Airborne Division and later fought with that Division at Arnhem. The Gurkha Battalion had the smoothest passage in forming as it consisted of one class who spoke one language and was officered by British officers of the Gurkha Brigade. It was commanded at that time by the then Lt.-Col. F. T. Loftus-Tottenham, D.S.O., who afterwards commanded the 81st West African Division.

When I reported to Brigade H.Q. in November 1941, the Brigade Staff was hardly an encouraging advertisement for any embryo parachutist. The Commander, Brigadier W. Gough, M.C. (late 2nd Gurkhas) with only one eye (having lost the other in the previous war) was hobbling around on sticks on account of a compound fracture of his leg sustained on his last jump at Ringway. The B.M., Major Hopkinson, M.B.E., was in a plaster spica—he had broken his back when he made the first static jump in India with Lt.-Col. Abbott, M.B.E. (152nd Bn.) and Squadron Leader W. Brereton, A.F.C. (Chief Landing Instructor at the A.I.S.), and they had all been deposited on the concrete outside the hangers at Drigh Road, Karachi. Apart from the ordinary difficulties of raising, Brigade H.Q.’s problems were legion. It had all the difficulties of parachute training with the corollary of design and modification of equipment for which there were no precedents in India. Basic information in the secret file consisted of a very full German Operation Order captured in Crete and two pages from Picture Post of the German Airlanding School somewhere near Brunswick. At G.H.Q.(I) there was a single air liaison officer Major Misra Chand, who had flown pre-war in the Viceroy’s Cup Air Race, while the Brigade Intelligence officer was Flt.-Lieut. Narendra, R.I.A.F., who had been on the first course for Indian Cadets at Cranwell.

The Airlanding School was at the Willingdon Airport, New Delhi. Although this was an R.A.F. Unit, all the parachute instructors, then, were from the Army. Equipment for parachute training consisted of twelve “X” type parachutes (or staticutes), an out-of-door trapeze and the “mock-ups” were the aircraft themselves, with the fuselage having a ground clearance of about three feet. Aircraft at that time consisted of a flight of Vickers Valencias, affectionately known as “Pigs” which were reputed to have been built about the year 1922. Courses lasted a fortnight with a previous one week’s course of P.T. There were thirty men per course, and five jumps were necessary to qualify for “Wings.” As there were only 12 “X” type parachutes in India it was necessary to use some of them twice a day; this was without any proper drying facilities such as drying sheds.

The Brigade’s first composite exercise was to take part in the march past
Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek in February 1942. The latter had been invited to New Delhi in the rather forlorn hope of bridging the widening rift between the Imperial War effort and Congress. In March 1942 all air training ceased as the Valencias departed in the direction of Burma to assist the evacuation. Owing to the acute shortage of all types of aircraft in the East the continual withdrawal of our planes served as a depressing indication of our fortunes on that front. Shortly after the retreat from Burma the first operational parachute sortie was made—in June 1942 Major J. O. M. Roberts, M.C., with a mixed party of British and Gurkha troops was dropped near Myit-Kyina to glean what information they could of future Japanese intentions.

To retire, this party had to march north several hundred miles to Fort Hertz, from where they were flown back to India. The landing strip at Fort Hertz had been prepared by a party of Sappers dropped under the command of Major G. E. C. Newlands, M.C. In July a company of the Indian Battalion was dropped in the Sind Desert to help round up the Hurs—a lawless Musselman tribe under the Pir of Pagiro. This, according to Field-Marshal the Viscount (now Earl) Wavell (1946), was probably the first use of parachutists in civil disturbances. On August 8 the Congress kettle, which had been bubbling for a long time, boiled over due to the arrest of Gandhi and other leaders in Bombay. The Brigade was immediately deployed for Internal Security in both Old and New Delhi to control tactical areas, where they remained for some four weeks. During these disturbances, the Gurkha Battalion had the great distinction of not firing a single shot—this during a number of potentially dangerous situations.

Owing to the increased importance of Delhi as a nodal air junction for the Burma theatre of operations, the A.L.S. was moved in October to Chaklala, in the North Punjab, where it became No. 3 Parachute Training School (P.T.S.) and an entirely R.A.F. commitment. For administrative convenience the Brigade moved into the same area with its base at Campbellpur, which was not far from the Indus at Attock. Here a third battalion, the 154th Gurkha, was formed from the remnants of the 3/7th Gurkha Rifles (one of the surviving units from the Burma retreat of 1942) to replace the British Battalion. In spite of the arrival of more aircraft—some Hudsons and a squadron of Wellwrights—the cold weather of 1942–43 was a depressing period owing to the number of unexplained fatalities. It speaks volumes for the morale of the Brigade that training went on in spite of the death-rate—about one per course. As courses then consisted of a hundred, this represented a one per cent mortality amongst would-be parachutists. One of these accidents which happily proved not fatal after a drop of nearly 700 feet was described by Neild and Mackenzie (1943). Eventually Group Captain Newnham (1947) came out from home at the beginning of 1943 and following his recommendations the accident rate rapidly declined.

Hot-weather training in Campbellpur was both trying on the temper, as the temperatures even at night did not drop much below 100°F, and wearing physically, as exercises which were entirely on foot were carried out over country which was mainly sandy soil. Owing to the low humidity there
was no prickly heat as in Delhi, but due to the extreme dryness of the atmosphere quite a lot of nose bleeding occurred. The advent of cold weather 1943–44 was greeted with relief rather like the approach to an oasis after days in a desert. SEAC had been formed and the new Brigadier M. J. T. Hope-Thomson, M.C., had just obtained a complete Wing of Dakotas. General Browning and Staff, including the A.D.M.S. 1st Airborne Division; Colonel Austin Eagger, C.B.E., came to visit us and operations were promised in the New Year. The Brigade was being reorganized—mortars had been taken out of the rifle companies and concentrated in the support or heavy company and machine guns had been removed from the battalions and concentrated in a Brigade Machine Gun Company. The Sappers had been increased to a Field Squadron, 411 Parachute Squadron I.E., and a Field Ambulance, 80th Indian Parachute, in which a surgical team was incorporated, was raised. In addition, the Indian Airborne Forces Depot was formed to take the place of the Parachute Training Centre (P.T.C.) at Chaklala, where the P.T.S. was also situated. Intensive air tactical training was now carried out and, considering the language problem, excellent co-operation developed between this Indian Brigade and the Empire aircrews of the Dakotas. This was a problem indeed, particularly for Jumpmasters—for example, Gurkha “sticks” were counted out from one to twenty in English, whereas Indian ones were counted out from one to ten in Urdu and this count then repeated.

During this air-training period it was found that on day drops there was a half per cent of serious casualties and one per cent of mild ones, whereas at night these figures were about doubled. . . . Serious casualties were hospital admissions. These figures are higher than those of No. 3 P.T.S. quoted by Pozner (1946), but this is understandable as for air tactical training jumps the facilities for bivouacking and for “mock-ups” were meagre compared with those of the P.T.S., and, in addition, the dropping zone was strange to both air crews and jumpers. From an inspection of the Long Roll of the Battalion—this after two years of formation—it was found that there was a 33 per cent annual turnover in other ranks and a 20 per cent one in the case of officers. This was exclusive of battle casualties, but inclusive of failures on training and training casualties. The original volunteers consisted of riflemen with an average of five years’ training, but later on recruits with as little as six months’ training were accepted. During this period there was no training depot, so each battalion was a cosmos in itself, doing its own recruiting, but maintaining a training company at the P.T.C. The R.M.O. was, therefore, responsible for all initial airborne medical examinations, the health of the battalion, the training of its medical section and the rehabilitation of the injured. The latter was a heartbreaking task as there was, then, no hospital rehabilitation service for fractures, and by the time the majority of the injured came out of hospital attendant functional disability was usually complete. The subsequent return of disabled men, a liability to their families, was doubly troubling to our consciences as it was not until after two years of hard battering by the battalion commanders that a man injured on parachute training received a pension equivalent to that of a man disabled in action.
Air training culminated in a three-weeks jungle training block course at Rai Wala near Dehra Dun. 153rd Battalion had the privilege there of doing the first battalion jump in India—this after an approach flight of four hundred miles from Chaklala. It was an unforgettable sight watching, for the first time, a Wing of Dakotas coming in on a bend of the Ganges and flying line ahead in flights of three, depositing the battalion group in a jungle clearing. It must have been a proud moment for the O.C., Lt.-Col. H. R. E. Willis when General Auchinleck followed by General Giffard strode across to the battalion rendezvous and greeted him with “Colonel, how magnificent.” This drop, at the time, we fondly imagined to be the shape of things to come, but how soon our hopes were dashed and complete frustration almost set in. Shortly afterwards all aircraft were removed, while the Brigade was converted to a mule-pack basis, and sent for advanced jungle training near Kohima. As little has been published about the early fighting in Imphal, and as from Owen’s account (1946) it would appear that the Brigade was flown in to fight as reinforcements, the following extract of General Slim’s Order of the Day (copy addressed to 50 Indian Parachute Brigade) published in the Field on August 31, 1944, is appended: “Your Parachute Brigade bore the first brunt of the enemy’s powerful flanking attack and by your staunchness gave the garrison of Imphal the vital time required to readjust their defences.”

In August 1944, the Brigade returned to India and joined its depot parties who had been moved to Secunderabad in Hyderabad (Deccan) some fourteen hundred miles from Chaklala. Here the new Airborne Division was endeavouring like a Phoenix to arise from the ashes of the 44th Indian Armoured Division. The projected plan was for the divisional units to come from the old Armoured Division, another parachute brigade to come from home and the airlanding brigade to be formed from an ex-Chindit one, while the divisional reconnaissance squadron was formed from the Governor-General’s Body Guard who had forsaken temporarily their chargers and lances for jeeps and brens. Meanwhile 50th Brigade was ordered to continue under ALFSEA with air training for the next phase of the 14th Army operations. This, however, was easier to order than to carry out, as it was soon discovered that the airfields around Secunderabad were unsuitable for Dakotas and an alternative site at Bilaspur had to be turned down for medical reasons. Eventually the Brigade was ordered back to Chaklala—bag and baggage—the complete fourteen hundred miles. This decision was only reached after the Brigade commander, now Brigadier Woods (late 1st/17th Dogras) and the Battalion commanders had each been summoned once or twice to G.H.Q. (I) to discuss future movements.

1Commander-in-Chief India.
211th Army Group Commander.
3We were informed at the time that it was because of operations in Italy, but afterwards it was apparent that it was because of the Chindit operation.
4Their Sikh troops were the first in India to jump. Their late appearance in the airborne world was due to the difference of opinion between them and the R.A.F. with regard to suitable headgear for parachuting. Eventually a compromise was reached with the Sikhs wearing a sort of super knee-pad tied around the outside of their pagris.
Air training proceeded smoothly at Chaklala until December when it suddenly ceased. Everyone wondered what had now gone wrong until it was discovered that the 14th Army advance had been so swift towards Mandalay that they had outstripped their ground Lines of Communication and had, in fact, overrun the dropping zone which had been planned near Shwebo for the Brigade at the beginning of February 1945. As it was not considered that further parachute operations could take place before the advent of the monsoons, 50th Brigade was split up to form the nucleus of two parachute brigades in the new Division. This decision was forced on the authorities in India as the 2nd British Parachute Brigade, which had been earmarked for the East, was now fully committed in Greece. The 152nd Indian Parachute Battalion was, therefore, split into two while two British Battalions, the 15th and 16th Parachute and the 77th Brigade H.Q. as well as the Pathfinder Company, were formed from what British volunteers were left after the disbandment of Special Force (Wingate). The Airlanding Brigade, the 14th Indian, consisted of the 2nd Black Watch, the 4th/6th Rajputana Rifles and the 6th/16th Punjab Regiment. The parachute battalions were now all renumbered as Indian or Gurkha Battalions of the Indian Parachute Regiment, which had just been formed with General Browning as first Colonel Commandant. A new type of Field Ambulance was formed, an Indian Parachute Field Ambulance (combined). It consisted of an H.Q. and five sections, two of which were British, and had all the disadvantages inherent in a hybrid organization. To each Field Ambulance were attached two Indian Mobile Surgical Units. While this reorganization was taking place it became suddenly necessary to mount a parachute operation to neutralize the guns at Elephant Point, which commanded the entrance to the mouth of the Rangoon River. This, although nominally a divisional operation, was the swansong of the original 50th Brigade, as a composite Battalion from its old battalions was formed and, under Lt.-Col. G. E. C. Newlands, M.C., landed and carried out its appointed task. While the Battalion was taking part in the Victory March through Rangoon, news of the end of the war in Europe was announced.

The 44th Indian Airborne Division continued to form at Secunderabad under Major-General E. E. Down, C.B.E., and for a period of two months (July and August) there was an Airborne Corps H.Q. in India—Commander Lt.-General Gale. The second division would have been the 6th Airborne Division from home. In June the 44th Indian Airborne Division was ordered to Bilaspur C.P. to begin air-training; here there was a group of air-fields which had been built following the Japanese invasion threat. This move was a classic example of one carried out in the face of strong medical opposition. It was vigorously pointed out that at Jhansi in similar terrain and under similar climatic conditions two years before, there had been a serious breakdown in the training of Special Force which had later adversely affected some of their units in the field. Bilaspur, near Nagpur,1 was a highly malarious area which abounded in snakes, with a fairish proportion of kraits. As the Division was under suppressive mepracine, malaria was, however, of little account. One of the

1Means literally the City of Snakes. It was one of the two hottest places in India.
Brigades was encamped near Ratanpur, a site of an ancient Hindu civilization. Here filariasis was common and something like one in four of the inhabitants was an interesting walking pathological specimen. Owing to the high humidity of Bilaspur, and poor washing facilities, ringworm was rife. When the war ended training had virtually ceased as the majority of the British, half the Gurkha and some of the Indian troops were badly affected, i.e. their heads and bodies were covered with ringworm. The only bright note in this somewhat dismal period at Bilaspur was the end of the war and the Division having the privilege of supplying the majority of the parachute medical teams which were dropped in Siam, French Indo-China, Malaya and Indonesia as the harbingers of help to Allied prisoners of war.

Towards the end of the year the Division, now the 2nd Indian Airborne, was moved to the Quetta-Karachi area and concentrated once again on Internal Security duties. Shortly afterwards with the advent of Indian Independence, the British units were withdrawn from the Division and brigaded in the 6th British Independent Parachute Brigade, while the Indian and Gurkha battalions were disbanded. When last reported (1947); the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade under Brigadier Y. S. Paranjpe was fighting the insurgents in Kashmir.

The war ended before the Division could show its paces, but there had been both symptoms and signs that the airborne resources in India had been overstretched. Up to the end of 1944 it had not been easy to maintain reinforcements, of a sufficiently high standard for 50th Parachute Brigade, to cover normal wastage and training losses. The question might well be asked whether it is economical to lock up a highly trained specialist force for such long periods of time and also whether the air training, of such a large mass of troops as a division, is worth while, when the standard of proficiency which could be reached by such a group was low, especially as General Wingate had shown, troops could be trained for air transportation at almost a moment's notice. But it is probable that, for spearhead thrusts to seize the initial airstrips, a nucleus of trained paratroops will always be required. However, paratrooping in India was certainly not without interest. It varied from circus days in Delhi when the drop of each “stick” of parachutists was watched by a multitude of visiting Allied Generals and Indian Potentates, to footslogging across the plains of the North Punjab; from being expendible in the thickets of the mountainous country of the Assam border to jungle training in the steamy wastes of the Central Provinces. But the real tragedy was, that when a fine precision instrument had been formed in the cold weather 1943-44, it should have been blunted in such a manner. It is interesting to speculate what would have been the outcome of the North Burma Campaign if the 50th Parachute Brigade had captured the Myitkyina Airfield—Exercise “Boggy” (1942)—at the beginning of 1944 and Special Force had been flown in there and not left to roam several months in the jungle.

I would like to thank Brigadier G. J. V. Crosby, C.B.E., T.D., late D.D.M.S. 33 Indian Corps for allowing me to peruse “Account of operations
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of 33 Indian Corps,” Lt.-Col. G. E. C. Newlands, M.C., for giving me the figures of strengths and casualties of 153rd Gurkha Parachute Battalion, and Colonel G. T. Gimlette, A.D.M.S., Home Counties District, for permission to forward this paper.

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