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Learning to Fail? Wartime Adaptation and Special Force in Burma, 1942–1944

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ABSTRACT
This article considers wartime tactical adaptation and its relationship with operational performance and outcomes during the Second World War. Specifically, it examines Long Range Penetration Groups (LRPG) facing the Imperial Japanese Army in Burma during two major operations to reveal how adaptation may decrease combat effectiveness and contribute to operational failure. This conclusion challenges contemporary assumptions about adaptation during conflict and suggests some of the costs when adaptation fails. It raises new questions about what circumstances and in what ways tactical adaptation may contribute to operational success or failure during mid-to-high intensity combat, relevant for contemporary theorists and practitioners.

Introduction

When the audit of warfare reveals military shortcomings, how should forces respond to be effective and successful? In 2011, Williamson Murray emphasised how 'the problem of adaptation in war represents one of the most persistent, yet rarely examined problems that military institutions confront'.[1] This pursuit to understand wartime adaptation benefitted from increased attention since the mid-2000's, delivering new insights and creating a growing subfield with strong practical relevance.[2]

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v8i1.1607
[1]Williamson Murray, *Adaptation In War: With Fear Of Change,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 1.
[2]Theo Farrell, Frans Osinga, and James Russell, eds., *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan,* (Stanford, California: Stanford Security Studies, 2013); Adam Grissom, 'The Future of Military Innovation Studies', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (October 2006), pp. 905-934; Frank G. Hoffman, *Mars Adapting: Military Change During War,* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2021); Raphael D. Marcus, *Israel's Long War with Hezbollah: Military Innovation and Adaptation Under Fire* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018); James Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and*

Research often drew upon historical studies that addressed wartime change, to include examples from the Second World War.[3] However, in 2020 one of the subfield's primary contributors noted how contemporary studies continued insufficiently to explain this phenomenon, specifically how 'less studied by historians and social scientists is how rival military organisations at war adapt to the demands of their conflict as well as each other'.[4]

This omission combines with significant practical relevance as wartime adaptation may be considered an 'essential attribute for successful militaries, and may become even more important during future conflicts'.[5] In response, this paper addresses a paradox insufficiently examined thus far: In what circumstances may wartime tactical adaption reduce battlefield effectiveness and contribute to operational failure? Based on new archival research of primary sources at the Imperial War Museum, London, the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at King's College London, The National Archives, Kew, published and unpublished items at the British Library, and existing source material, examining the evolution of Long Range Penetration Groups (LRPG) provides insights with implications both conceptual and practical about this topic of enduring

War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005–2007, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011); Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes,* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2015).

[3]John Buckley, *Monty's Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe, 1944–45,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013); Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), second edition, originally published 2003; Michael D. Doubler, *Closing With The Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944–1945,* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1994); Robert Engen, *Canadians Under Fire: Infantry Effectiveness in the Second World War,* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009); Charles Forrester, *Monty's Functional Doctrine: Combined Arms Doctrine in British 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944–45,* (Warwick, England: Helion & Company Limited, 2015); Russell A. Hart, *Clash of Arms: How the Allies Won in Normandy,* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001); Peter R. Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumphs of American Infantry Divisions, 1941–1945,* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

[4]Theo Farrell, 'Military Adaptation and Organisational Convergence in War: Insurgents and International Forces in Afghanistan', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (25 May 2020), p. 2.

[5]David Barno and Nora Bensahel, *Adaptation Under Fire: How Militaries Change in Wartime,* (Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 3.

interest.[6] It also delivers broader suggestions about some of the costs when adaptation fails to improve operational performance.

British failures during the Japanese invasion of Burma and a subsequent debacle in Arakan revealed low readiness, a lack of mobility, an inability to fight in the jungle, and poor small-unit skills. A new idea emerged aimed at restoring speed and mobility to attack the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) that was spread thin across the jungle: to create new units for LRP that could raid, attack, isolate Japanese units, and force their withdrawal.[7] Over the next two years an initial brigade-sized group evolved into the 20,000-member Special Force with a new combat purpose, representing a significant adaptation that shaped battlefield performance during its two wartime operations. These changes displayed a clear tactical adaptation, considered to be 'changed methods, techniques, or procedures to make people, units, or equipment suitable for new combat purposes or different combat conditions in a repeated or shared manner'.[8] The results, however, were two costly battlefield failures. If success is considered 'the ability to achieve assigned missions with acceptable expenditures of material and human resources according to planned times', then how the LRPG conducted wartime adaptation contributed to failed operations as measured by goals, time, and costs.[9] Therefore, the example of wartime adaptation by the Special Force indicates important risks associated with wartime change: how tactical adaptation may contribute to failure, and how additional changes may exacerbate costs.

Assessment and Change

New concepts for LRP emerged in 1942 and evolved into the form they would take a year later on Operation Longcloth. The unit deployed independently to disrupt Japanese lines of communication and induce IJA consolidation on rear positions.[10] Led by Colonel Orde Wingate, his 1942 draft paper 'Notes on Penetration Warfare' argued that long range penetration could deliver 'great value' but that Burma

[6]George Wilton, 'Forgotten Chindits – 23 British Infantry Brigade', *British Journal of Military History*, Vol. 6, Issue 3 (November 2020), pp. 85-127.

[7]Raymond Callahan, 'The Prime Minister and the Indian Army's Last War', in Kaushik Roy, ed., *The Indian Army in the Two World Wars,* (Boston, Massachusetts: Brill, 2012), p. 325.

[8]Definition from Brett Potter Van Ess, 'Wartime Tactical Adaptation and Operational Success: British and Japanese Armies in Burma and India, 1941–45', PhD Thesis, King's College London, 2019.

[9]Modified from 'combat effectiveness' in Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*, p. 3.

[10]Simon Anglim, 'Orde Wingate, "Guerrilla" Warfare and Long-range Penetration, 1940-44', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (September 2006), pp. 241-262; Donovan Webster, *The Burma Road* (New York: Perennial, 2003), pp. 81-110.

Command lacked an organization to conduct it effectively.[11] By operating small columns directed through wireless communications and resupplied from the air, forces could attack vital points and deliver 'fatal blows' to the IJA.[12] During May and June, Wingate presented the ideas which would underlie future operations. First, that IJA troops behind the front lines would be inferior to forward troops and would be vulnerable to attack. Second, that a force with sufficient preparation could penetrate IJA forces, could coordinate with each other by radio, and seek resupply from the air. Third, that attacking IJA lines of communication would 'tie up a disproportionate number of enemy troops', and cause a disproportionate impact in the theatre.[13] In September 1942, Wingate refined the concept, with columns to act independently for indefinite periods.[14] Columns would infiltrate 200–300 miles and concentrate attacks to lure Japanese defenders into pursuit, followed by columns dispersing to 'lead the enemy punitive columns on a wild goose chase' and compel 'very considerable enemy forces' to withdraw from forward positions'.[15] With IJA units forced to protect their 'long and vulnerable lines of communication', the LRPG would force significant disruptions across IJA units and command.[16]

It was political and high level military lobbying and endorsement that facilitated the new LRP concept, rather than any institutional military mechanism being used to consider, test, or implement these new ideas. First, 'that Wingate was in India at all was Wavell's doing'.[17] the Commander-in-Chief India who worked previously with Wingate and summoned him to Burma.[18] Wavell decided 'to give [Long Range Penetration] a trial', and in mid-1942 he approved forming 77 Indian Infantry Brigade to do it.[19] Also, Wingate drove events with his advocacy of LRP concepts, 'strategic manifestos' and 'advocacy of long-range penetration'.[20] Wingate's techniques proved

[11]Imperial War Museum London (hereinafter IWM), Wingate Burma Box Papers Box I item 2, 'Orde Wingate Notes on Penetration Warfare—Burma Command 25/3/42 draft paper', pp. 1-2.
[12]Ibid., p. 2.
[13]Frank McLynn, *The Burma Campaign: Disaster into Triumph 1942-45,* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 81; Christopher Sykes, *Orde Wingate,* (London: Collins, 1959), pp. 367-369.
[14]IWM Wingate Burma Box Papers Box I item 11, 'Orde Wingate 77 Indian Infantry Brigade', 22 September 1942, p. 1.
[15]Ibid.
[16]Ibid.
[17]Callahan, 'The Prime Minister and the Indian Army's Last War', p. 325.
[18]Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War 1941-1945,* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1984), p. 119; Anglim, 'Orde Wingate', pp. 241-242.
[19]Callahan, 'The Prime Minister and the Indian Army's Last War', p. 325.
[20]Anglim, 'Orde Wingate', pp. 248.

successful as he gained access 'far beyond what his rank and achievements warranted'.[21] When presenting his concept at conferences in 1942, senior leaders responded coolly to Wingate's ideas but his advocacy and lobbying would gain core believers to shape the new force.[22] Subsequently, Wavell allotted forces to be re-designated as LRP Groups, and in July 1942 they moved into central India to train.[23]

The new 77 Indian Brigade possessed 3,000 personnel across three battalions supplemented by a commando company.[24] One battalion came from 13 King's Liverpool Regiment which had previously conducted coastal defence and garrison duties, another came from a recently recruited Gurkha Rifles unit, and the final unit from the Burma Rifles which had retreated into India in 1942. A supplement came from the Bush Warfare School and became the 142 Commando Company, 'by far the best and most experienced' of the troops.[25] The others were less prepared. During late 1942 'the majority of 77 Indian Infantry Brigade needed remedial basic work in addition to specialized instructions in the tactics of LRP'.[26] Training emphasised the core skills required for the new mission of deep penetration with different tactics to those of conventional British and Indian units, although the platoon-level skills would not be completely new since jungle columns would resemble 'infantry fighting in conditions of poor visibility without supporting arms'.[27] Training took place in Patharia and Sagar, with support from Central India Command although the brigade was autonomous and not under its command. The specialised, rigorous, eight-week training emphasised jungle warfare, small-unit techniques, core capabilities, and physical fitness for cross-country movement.[28] Trainers used tactical exercises and sand pits to teach basic infantry skills and remedy 'the mistakes in minor tactics' seen

[21]McLynn, The Burma Campaign, p. 87.
[22]See Allen, Burma, p. 119; McLynn, The Burma Campaign, pp. 81-82; David Rooney, Burma Victory: Imphal, Kohima and the Chindit Issue, March 1944 to May 1945, (London: Arms and Armour 1992), p. 108; Sykes, Orde Wingate, p. 367.
[23]O.C. Wingate, Report on Operations of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade in Burma February to June 1943, (New Delhi: The Manager Government of India Press, 1943), p. 2; S. Woodburn Kirby, The War Against Japan: India's Most Dangerous Hour, (Uckfield, East Sussex: The Naval & Military Press Ltd, 2004), p. 244, originally published 1958.
[24]Wingate, *Report on Operations*, 2. Uniquely, 77 Indian Brigade had almost no Indian troops, it was deliberately mislabelled to confuse the IJA. Of the original eight columns, the sixth was disbanded to fill losses in others. See Julian Thompson, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the War in Burma 1942-45,* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2002), p. 63.
[25]Tim Moreman, *Chindit 1942-45*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2009), p. 10.
[26]Moreman, *Chindit*, p. 13.
[27]Wingate, Report on Operations, p. 3.
[28]Allen, *Burma*, pp. 122-129; McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, pp. 84-89.

against the IJA.[29] Uniquely, the 77 Indian Brigade trained largely independently from GHQ India. It also lacked a single, formal doctrine. The core tenet of training was long marches to build endurance, mental toughness, and practice in moving through the jungle undetected.[30] Specialized training progressed from sections to platoons to columns, repeating drills to inculcate immediate dispersal during a firefight, patrolling techniques, pre-arranged attacks, booby traps, and river crossings.[31] In September, 2,000 members conducted a five-day brigade exercise,[32] followed by additional training to refine jungle tradecraft, and a final brigade exercise near Jhansi in December.[33] In January 1943 the 77 Indian Brigade moved to the border and prepared to enter Burma.[34]

Operation Longcloth – February to June 1943

Four goals shaped Operation Longcloth. Firstly, to destroy the railways near Indaw and cut the Mandalay-Myitkyina line. Secondly, to divide the IJA 18 and 56 divisions to isolate 18 Division. Thirdly, to harass the IJA, specifically units of 18 Division. Finally, if conditions permitted, to cut the Mandalay-Lashio railway. With these aims, the troops formed seven self-contained columns consisting of 306 to 369 men divided into Northern and Southern groups.[35] The smaller Southern Group, with columns 1 and 2, aimed to distract IJA defenders from the other group by crossing the Chindwin River and simulating a larger force.[36] The bigger Northern Group included brigade HQ and Columns 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8.[37] It aimed to destroy the Mandalay-Myitkyina railway at

[29]Wingate, Report on Operations, p. 6.
[30]Moreman, *Chindit*, pp. 14-15; Webster, *The Burma Road,* p. 92.
[31]Webster, *The Burma Road,* p. 93; Moreman, *Chindit*, pp. 16-17.
[32]Wingate, Report on Operations, p. 7; McLynn, The Burma Campaign, p. 89.
[33]Philip Stibbe, *Return Via Rangoon*. (London: Leo Cooper, 1995), pp. 33, 41-42.
[34]Ibid., p. 46; Basil Collier, The War in the Far East 1941–1945, A Military History, (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 325; Webster, The Burma Road, p. 93.
[35]Collier, The War in the Far East, p. 326. Columns consisted of 306-369 men, approximately 15 horses and 100 mules, as well as four anti-tank rifles, two mortars, two heavy machine guns, nine light machine guns, and two light anti-aircraft machine guns. Southern Group (No. 1) contained LRP Group HQ and commander Lieutenant Colonel L.A Alexander, with Column 1 (Major Dunlop), Column 2 (Major A. Emmett) and 142 Commando Company (Major J.B. Jeffries). Northern Group (No. 2) included brigade headquarters (Brigadier Wingate), Group headquarters (Lieutenant Colonel S.A. Cooke), Column 3 (Major Calvert), Column 4 (Major Bromhead), Column 5 (Major Fergusson), Column 7 (Major Gilkes), Column 8 (Major Scott), 2nd Burma Rifles (Lieutenant Colonel L.G. Wheeler), and Independent Mission (Captain Herring) which may be considered a human intelligence scout team.
[36]Kirby, The War Against Japan: India's Most Dangerous Hour, p. 311.
[37]Ibid.

several points and isolate two IJA divisions from resupply; to harass IJA forces to the northwest of Mandalay near Shwebo; and cut the Mandalay-Lashio railway.[38] Of Japan's four divisions in Burma, the operation targeted 18 Division, on the road from Taunggyi to Kengtung in the Shan States.[39] The division had positioned its three regiments for defence around Indaw, the Hukawng Valley, and Myitkyina, using garrisons, forward outposts, and regular patrols from those locations.[40] It had fought sporadic engagements with local insurgents and suffered few battlefield casualties.[41] Overall, 18 Division was a standard IJA unit: battle-tested, with past success but some erosion of capabilities from sustained deployment.[42]

On 14 February and the next four days the Columns crossed the Chindwin River at multiple points and headed into the IJA-held jungle. As the 1,000 strong diversionary Southern Group progressed toward Kyaikthin, 'problems presented themselves almost immediately' when the IJA ambushed them during an attempt to sabotage a train station.[43] Following initial mishaps and an IJA attack against Column 2 that proved devastating, about half the group were forced to retreating to India.[44] Concurrently, the main thrust of the Northern Group 'had been largely successful in evading the Japanese' and began to attack.[45] Firstly, Column 3 moved 100 miles and in early March,

[38]Allen, *Burma*, p. 17.
[39]Kirby, India's Most Dangerous Hour, p. 309.
[40]Jon Diamond, *1943-44 Chindit Versus Japanese Infantrymen* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2015), pp. 11, 17.
[41]Ibid.
[42]For 18 Division background, see Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), pp. 10, 20; Combined Arms Research Library, N14290.99, *Organization of the Japanese Army,* (United States War Department Military Intelligence Division, Far Eastern Unit: 31 January 1944), p. 5, p. 9; Combined Arms Research Library, N20384.6, *Japanese Recruiting and Replacement System,* (United States War Department Military Intelligence Division. Washington DC: July 1945), p. 99. For operations in Malaya and Singapore, see Allen, *Burma*, p. 133; Collier, *The War in the Far East,* pp. 192-193; T.R. Moreman, *The Jungle, The Japanese and the British Commonwealth Armies at War 1941-1945: Fighting Methods, Doctrine and Training for Jungle Warfare,* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 25; H.P. Wilmott, *Empires in the Balance: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies,* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1982), pp. 330-332. For Burma invasion, see Allen, *Burma*, p. 59; Willmott, *Empires in the Balance,* p. 442; Bill Yenne, *The Imperial Japanese Army: The Invincible Years, 1941-1942,* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2014), p. 282.
[43]Webster, *The Burma Road,* p. 94.
[44]Ibid., pp. 94-95; Allen, *Burma*, p. 128.
[45]Callahan, p. 66.

demolished two bridges as well as approximately 70 sections of the railway line.[46] Separately, Column 4 moved slowly, Wingate relieved the commander, and in early March the column was decisively ambushed by IJA forces while attempting a river crossing.[47] Half the column quickly 'fell to panic' as the IJA killed half of the defenders and destroyed most of the communications, causing the remaining fifteen members to retreat to India.[48] Column 4's other half pushed east, became lost, and would 'struggle back to India, having stumbled hundreds of miles'.[49] Separately, in early March, Column 2 was seen and attacked by an IJA company with subsequent confusion creating a 'disaster'.[50] Thus, by late March two columns had been lost but the LRPG had pushed over 200 miles into IJA-held Burma and demolished several points of the railway connecting Mandalay and Myitkyina, one of the primary objectives.[51]

Next the LRPG transitioned to the operation's second stage as five of the original eight columns moved east of the Irrawaddy River to cut the Mandalay-Lashio railway. With the defenders now alerted, the columns evaded some of the pursing Japanese when crossing the mile-wide Irrawaddy, with Column 3 barely escaping and forced to abandon wounded personnel.[52] Critically, this movement across the river caused the columns to leave the cover of the jungle and enter the plains, a dry, hot, open area that exposed them and proved 'far less suited' to their tactics.[53] It also alerted more of the IJA which moved to confine and destroy the columns using the roads, rivers, and mobile forces.[54] The IJA's 18 Division began to trap the columns operating in the waterless forests accessible to IJA units by road and track.[55] Reinforced IJA battalion sweeps and regimental manoeuvres isolated the retreating columns, and forced them to divide into smaller units, and systematic movements become impossible for the columns.[56] By late March the columns were struggling to sustain themselves so they ceased operations and began returning to India.[57] The force dispersed into small teams with some parts evading the Japanese for the next two months.[58]

[46]Moreman, *Chindit*, 40.
[47]Webster, *The Burma Road,* pp. 96.
[48]Ibid.
[49]Ibid., p. 97.
[50]Wingate, Report on Operations, 31.
[51]Callahan, *Burma*, 66.
[52]Kirby, India's Most Dangerous Hour, p. 315.
[53]Moreman, *Chindit*, 41.
[54]Kirby, *India's Most Dangerous Hour,* p. 318.
[55]Ibid., p. 319.
[56]Allen, *Burma*, p. 135.
[57]Wingate, Report on Operations, 47.
[58]Column 7 retreated to China. Wingate, *Report on Operations*, 53.

Overall, Operation Longcloth was 'an expensive failure'.[59] Of the original 3,000 personnel only 2,200 returned, with 'most of them unfit for further [LRPG] operations'.[60] Afterwards, the IJA quickly repaired the damage. The units did penetrate IJA held territory and cut the first railway for a while but delivered few other tangible gains despite many personnel and resources being lost. The operation failed to force the IJA units to consolidate, failed to cut the second railway, and failed to harass Japanese defenders to any significant degree. After crossing the Irrawaddy River into the Burmese plains, the LRPG struggled to manoeuvre – supposedly a core skill of the Column and mission – much less deliver any significant damage to the railway infrastructure or to defending IJA units. Within a short period of time the IJA repaired its lines of communication suffered only a 'negligible' number of casualties.[61] The operation 'had no immediate effect on Japanese disposition or plans' with the defenders neither consolidating rear forces nor withdrawing forces from the IJA's forward defences.[62] For the IJA, 'the counter-measures they had adopted were successful' and caused significant casualties, while also forcing columns to disperse and to withdraw.[63] While outsiders cited alleged benefits in morale, propaganda, and creativity, in reality 'even Wingate's own supporters admitted that the operation was a failure'.[64] The Columns had been increasingly isolated and were unable to match IJA battalion firepower. Vulnerable to encirclement, after luring the IJA into attack - as had been planned - it produced the opposite outcome and 'proved the undoing' of Operation Longcloth.[65]

Adaptation had addressed broader shortcomings in jungle skills, immobility, and an inability to counter IJA offensive tactics, but the LRPG proved unable to achieve their goals while suffering a high cost in lives and resources. Eventually, the mobile units lost their mobility; harassing units against IJA infrastructure proved unable to cause significant damage; the Columns were outmatched by IJA firepower; and small groups were forced to disperse in an improvised withdrawal. If using a cost-benefit measure of objectives attained and resources expended, it is hard to disagree with criticisms of the mission as 'achieving nothing of strategic value, suffering heavy casualties (one third

[59]William J. Slim, *Defeat Into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945,* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), p. 162, originally published 1956.
[60]Callahan, *Burma*, p. 67.
[61]Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, p. 162.
[62]Ibid.
[63]Kirby, *India's Most Dangerous Hour,* p. 328.
[64]McLynn, *The Burma Campaign,* p. 157.
[65]John Costello, *The Pacific War 1941-1945,* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981), p. 395; Slim, *Defeat Into Victory,* p. 162; Allen, *Burma*, p. 135.

of the force deployed) and teaching nothing of specific tactical value to the regular army'.[66]

Special Force and Change

During 1943, Wingate expanded the size and his ambitions for a second LRP mission into Burma. Tactics were changed to infiltrating by air using gliders, and transport planes.[67] The aim was also changed, to establish fortified positions and to lure IJA units 'into situations where they could be destroyed in detail' or forced to retreat.[68] For this new mission, the LRPG consolidated several units from outside Fourteenth Army and expanded into a six-brigade force with 20,000 members, re-designated as 3 Indian Division. It also became known as the 'Special Force'.[69]

Again, personal advocacy and high level political and military endorsement enabled that expansion. Wingate advocated this increased role based on his 'highly coloured report' on the operation that 'exaggerated his success'.[70] Prime Minister Winston Churchill asked Wingate to join him at the Quadrant Conference where, despite some resistance, Wingate secured an expanded LRPG and mission.[71] With endorsement and authorisation, the newly-promoted Major General Wingate expanded the LRPG. 77 Indian Brigade reformed in August 1943 at Jhansi where 111 Indian Brigade was also formed.[72] Critically, the LRPG received 70 British Infantry Division in early October, adding an infantry battalion to each brigade and expanding each brigade from six

[66]Moreman, *The Jungle*, p. 77.
[67]IWM Wingate Chindit Papers, Box II, Para.8, 'Minutes of Conference Held at HQ Fourteenth Army and Air HQ Bengal – 3 Dec. '43'; IWM Wingate Chindit Papers, Box IV Letter AX.866, 'from Air Minister to AHQ India of 22 Sept. 1944'. Both cited in Anglim, 'Orde Wingate', pp. 254-255, footnote 104.
[68]Anglim, 'Orde Wingate', pp. 255, 257.
[69]The brigades were 77th Indian, 111th Indian, 14th British, 16th British, 23rd British, and 3rd West African. In Collier, *The War in the Far East,* p. 400. Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 229.
[70]Callahan, 'The Prime Minister', p. 326; Wingate, *Report on Operations*.
[71]Webster, *The Burma Road,* pp. 106-108; Rooney, *Burma Victory,* pp. 112-114; Callahan, 'The Prime Minister', pp. 326-328.
[72]The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) WO 203/4204, 'Despatch by General Sir Claude J.E. Auchinleck, G.C.B, G.C.I.E., C.S.I., D.S.O., O.G.E., A.D.C., Commander-in-Chief in India covering the period 21st June 1943-15th November 1943, Copy No. 35', 22 November 1945, p. 25.

columns to eight.[73] Finally, 3 West African Brigade arrived in India and joined the Special Force in November 1943.[74]

In considering the lessons learned from Longcloth, the Special Force never possessed a formal doctrine. Internal assessments of the first operation identified lessons, needs, and proposed changes, but failed to question any of the underlying assumptions regarding deep penetration. Instead, Wingate's post-operation report concluded that the first mission validated the theory underlying LRPG: it 'prevented a number of developments' and 'upset the enemy's plans'.[75] It recommended that 'when Long Range Penetration is used again, it must be on the greatest scale possible'.[76] This expanded concept would also require new ways of fighting.

The Longcloth concept of mobile columns evolved into brigade-controlled strongholds supported by mobile columns that aimed to employ defensive tactics for offensive effect. Longcloth had revealed the dangers in attacking IJA defensive positions since columns lacked sufficient firepower.[77] Now, in addition to fighting the IJA units as the columns manoeuvred in the open, the LRPG would induce the Japanese 'to attack us in our defended positions' and therefore reverse the firepower imbalance.[78] A stronghold would be a forward base with an airstrip defended by a garrison and two mobile columns and all supported by air.[79] A core area 500 yards in diameter within a larger defensive area and an airstrip aligned with the local terrain would reduce accessibility and provide all-round firepower. After arriving by air and securing the

[73]Ibid.

[74]Thompson, *The Book of the War in Burma,* pp. 232. For an order of battle see Rooney, *Burma Victory* pp. 115-116. 16 Brigade (Fergusson) with eight columns of British troops; 77 Brigade (Calvert), with twelve columns total, six British and six Gurkha; 111 Brigade (Lentaigne) with four British columns and one Gurkha; 14 Brigade (Brodie), with eight British columns; 23 Brigade (Perowne) with three regiments, trained as a LRPG but removed from the division and Special Force before the second operation; 3 West African Brigade (Gillmore), with six columns from across the 6, 7, and 12 battalions of The Nigeria Regiment.

[75]Wingate, Report on Operations, 57.

[76]Ibid.

[77]IWM Major WVH Martin 91/9/1 Wingate's Training Memorandum and Notes, 'O.C. Wingate, 'Special Force Commander's Training Memorandum No.8, "The Stronghold"', 1, 20 February 20 1944.

[78]Ibid.

[79]IWM Wingate Chindit Papers, Box II, 'Minutes of Conference'; IWM Wingate Chindit Papers, Box IV, AX.866. Both cited in Anglim, 'Orde Wingate', pp. 254-255, footnote 104. Discussion of Strongholds and changed techniques from IWM 91/9/1, 'The Stronghold', and Anglim, 'Orde Wingate', pp. 255-256.

area, engineers would prepare an airstrip, followed by flying in the brigade with artillery, anti-aircraft guns, and an infantry battalion for the garrison. Floater columns would patrol externally to detect IJA units and provoke them into attacking through restricted approaches. The defending forces could reinforce the columns and fight outside the base. If IJA attackers reached the base, defenders could hold and lure additional IJA divisional assets for their destruction.[80] At these strongholds, about 8,000 men would form 'a network of larger, more heavily manned and more permanent' bases.[81] The stronghold concept was not unprecedented, as the British Army had used fortified positions in a system of boxes held by brigades in North Africa during 1941, but in Burma the Special Force strongholds would be inserted behind enemy lines and had different operational goals.[82]

Inside the Special Force, the leadership produced reports, directives, and pamphlets regarding lessons from the past and prescriptions for the future. Ideas emerged within the organisation and were disseminated under division authority, using an inward-focus that made few external contributions for units in conventional jungle operations.[83] This independence cut both ways, as GHQ India training documents made 'surprisingly little reference to LRP methods'.[84] Instead, Special Force 'jealously guarded independence from GHQ India' which meant that lessons and ideas remained within the Special Force.[85] Its 50-page commander's pamphlet outlined 'the theory and principles' of LRPG with subsequent chapters addressing details like the column, 'its day to day routine in operations' and specific technical problems.[86] The Special Force Commander's Training Notes, aimed 'to throw additional light on the various problems', provided a general overview of LRPG, their purpose, and concept of

[80]IWM 91/9/1 'The Stronghold'; Wingate Chindit Papers Box II, 'No.1 Air Commando Close Support Forecasts – period 14/25th March, 1944 – Note by Commander Special Force'; and cited in Anglim, 'Orde Wingate', pp. 256, footnotes 112 and 113.
[81]Webster, *The Burma Road,* p. 107.
[82]See Anglim, 'Orde Wingate', pp. 256; Anglim also cites PRO, WO 231/126, Military Training Pamphlet No.52 – Forest, Bush and Jungle Warfare against a Modern Enemy, in pp. 24–26.
[83]Moreman, *The Jungle*, 9.
[84]Ibid.
[85]Ibid.
[86]IWM, Major WVH Martin 91/9/1 item 1, 'Shorthand, handwritten title 'Force Commanders Pamphlet on First LRP – Burma', on cyclostyled copy of Major-General O.C. Wingate's original Long Range Penetration (LRP) memorandum', undated, written following the 1943 Chindit operations, p. 1.

operations,[87] and addressed specific tactical situations like bivouac security, weapons, resupply procedures, and ambush techniques.[88] The directives and pamphlets discussed ways to improve procedures and some new techniques, but failed to alter Special Force's underlying principles or concepts. Internal assessments identified lessons, needs, and proposed changes, yet failed to question the underlying assumptions regarding LRP as a whole.

To incorporate the new tactics, Special Force conducted a 20-week training program in Central India during late 1943.[89] It emphasised the new techniques developed internally and was implemented separately from the broader changes occurring in other parts of the Indian Army during the same period.[90] Special Force training included new requirements for coordinating air supply, animal husbandry, river crossing, and continued to emphasise individual hardiness and marching. Training culminated in a three-week exercise in December, 'during which we marched 200 miles and chased runaway mules over another 200, swam rivers and carried heavier packs than we ever carried in Burma', followed by a 'large scale conference for all Special Force officers'.[91] This training reflected a learning process that was distinct from other, larger training and doctrine reforms underway across the Indian Army in 1943 and later applied effectively through 1945. While the Indian Army developed new tactics for jungle fighting to counter Japanese tactics, notably IJA defensive bunker systems and countering infiltration attacks, Special Force evolved largely independently, and in contrast to the Indian Army's employment of new offices and staff using the newly-formed Infantry Committee, Director of Infantry, and new official doctrine such as *Army in India Training Memorandum*. The Special Force focused on its

[87]IWM, Major WVH Martin 91/9/1 item 2, *Special Force Commander's Training Notes No. 1*, 'Lecture No. 1, General Rules for the employment of Forces of Deep Penetration in modern warfare', p. 1.

[88]IWM, Major WVH Martin, 91/9/1 item 3, *Special Force Commander's Training Notes No. 2*, 'Lecture Security in Bivouac'; IWM, Major WVH Martin 91/9/1, item 4, *Special Force Commander's Training Notes No. 3*, 'Infantry Anti-Tank Projector (PIAT)'; IWM, Major WVH Martin 91/9/1 item 5, *Special Force Commander's Training Notes No. 4*, 'Supply Dropping'; IWM, Major WVH Martin 91/9/1 item 5, *Special Force Commander's Training Notes No. 5*, 'Supply Dropping Drill'; IWM, Major WVH Martin, 91/9/1 item 7, *Special Force Commander's Training Notes No. 6*, 'Employment of Aircraft with Troops of Deep Penetration'; IWM, Major WVH Martin 91/9/1 item 8, *Special Force Commander's Training Notes No. 7*, 'The Column in Ambush'.

[89]Thompson, The Book of the War in Burma, p. 235.

[90]For an assessment about these changes, see Van Ess, 'Wartime Tactical Adaptation and Operational Success'.

[91]IWM 80/49/1 'Captain N. Durant, transcript (20 pp. photocopy) of letter to home', p. 2.

new techniques independently of the wider shifts and reforms underway elsewhere and was free from those obligations due to its comparative autonomy. The final preparations for Operation Thursday took place from December 1943 to February 1944 when 'training was spasmodic' with rehearsals, practice firing, and long marches.[92]

Operation Thursday – February to July 1944

Operation Thursday's objectives were to cut the communications of the IJA's 18 Division, harass its rear, prevent reinforcement, and inflict general damage and confusion.[93] It would use multiple brigades from 3 Indian Division including 77 and 111 Indian brigades, 14, 16, and 23 British brigades, and eventually 3 West African Brigade. The first units would be inserted by gliders behind the IJA forces to block resupply to the IJA's 18 Division and attack any other nearby Japanese forces.[94] With one overland and three aerial insertions at points surrounding Indaw, the Special Force would attack three objectives: Indaw, the Mandalay-Myitkyina railway, and the Bhamo-Myitkyina road.[95] Specifically, in the first wave, 16 British Brigade would march inland from Ledo, destroying an IJA garrison at Lonkin on the way to Indaw, where it would seize two airfields and establish a nearby stronghold. 77 Brigade would be inserted by glider into two landing zones and then march to seize the nearby railway and form a stronghold. 111 Brigade would fly by glider into two landing zones and move south of Indaw, to protect 16 Brigade by using road blocks and demolitions to prevent Japanese reinforcements from Mandalay.[96] 3 West African, 14 and 23 brigades would form a second wave to be flown in later for an attack on Indaw.[97]

On 10 February 16 Brigade embarked on the 300-mile march to the Mandalay-Myitkyina railway to prepare airstrips for the following two brigades.[98] The first thirty miles took nine days due to difficult terrain, poor conditions, and failing communications.[99] One column did attack the IJA garrison at Lonkin but 'this diversion achieved very little' and it 'caused further delay'.[100] Eventually, 16 Brigade arrived at Indaw and established the 'Aberdeen' stronghold, but this late arrival would cause

[92]Ibid., p. 3.
[93]Slim, *Defeat Into Victory,* p. 259.
[94]Rooney, *Burma Victory,* p. 121.
[95]Slim, Defeat Into Victory p. 267; Thompson, The Book of the War in Burma, p. 237.
[96]Thompson, The Book of the War in Burma, p. 238.
[97]Ibid., p. 245.
[98]Collier, *The War in the Far East,* p. 418.
[99]TNA WO 172/4395 16 British Infantry Brigade HQ, 1944 January, May–December, '16 Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, February', May 1944; Thompson, *The Book of the War in Burma,* p. 239.
[100]Rooney, *Burma Victory,* p. 128.

future problems.[101] On 5 March, 77 Brigade began flying to the landing zones 'Piccadilly' and 'Broadway'. After some initial mishaps, caused largely by trees, ditches, and overloaded gliders, the brigade arrived and began to construct the Broadway stronghold.[102] From 6 to 8 March, 111 Brigade's 1,200 men were flown in to the 'Chowringhee' landing zone.[103] 77 Brigade experienced some early success as it constructed and reinforced the Broadway stronghold while sending out columns to attack IJA infrastructure north of Indaw. By 13 March the brigade had cut the rail and road communications supplying the IJA's 18 Division and elements of the 31 Division near Kohima.[104] The brigade then began to create a defensive position at Mawlu, to include a landing strip and a drop zone, named White City. Forces moved into positions, which 'we were to occupy for the next seven weeks'[105] against multiple IJA attacks.[106] Separately, 111 Brigade struggled. Within five days it suffered from a poor river crossing which split the brigade; a supply drop went awry; and the brigade failed to reach its railway objective south of Indaw which prevented its support to 16 Brigade.[107]

Having established the Aberdeen stronghold on 20 March, members of 16 Brigade moved to attack Indaw.[108] Concurrently, in late March 14 Brigade and 3 West African Brigade were flown in by gliders and transport aircraft, with parts of 14 Brigade landing at Aberdeen and moving to attack away from Indaw.[109] Tired and unsupported,[110] 16 Brigade's attack 'proved disastrous' after its leading columns were surprised by IJA defenders on 26 and 27 March.[111] Attackers 'blundered into Japanese outposts' and struggled as '16 Brigade turned out to be ill-disciplined and poorly trained and ended up firing on each other during the battle'.[112] Columns failed to coordinate or concentrate attacks, resulting in weak assaults conducted piecemeal.[113] Units failed to

[101]Allen, *Burma*, pp. 330-332.
[102]TNA WO 203/1829 77 Indian Infantry Brigade: Operations in Burma 1944 February-August, 'R.G.K. Thompson, Report on Air Operations 77 Brigade North Burma' 5 March to 25 June 1944.
[103]Rooney, *Burma Victory,* p. 126.
[104]Ibid.
[105]IWM 80/49/1, Durant letter to home, 6.
[106]Ibid., pp. 9; Rooney, *Burma Victory,* p. 127.
[107]Rooney, *Burma Victory,* p. 127.
[108]Ibid., p. 128.
[109]Costello, *The Pacific War,* p. 464.
[110]TNA WO 172/4395, 16.
[111] Rooney, *Burma Victory,* p. 129; WO 172/4395, 3.
[112]McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, pp. 287-288.
[113]Ibid., p. 288.

seize the airfields or supply stores, and had difficulty maintaining coherence.[114] A separate column fought the IJA near Lake Indaw and lost most of its ammunition, heavy weapons, and radios.[115] A third column reached the airfield east of Indaw but, alone, the column was too weak and had to abandon the airfield. Thus, the brigade had failed in the Indaw attack, a critical goal, and the exhausted 16 Brigade required evacuation.[116] Special Force had failed to seize the Indaw airfields, to occupy the area, to prevent IJA reinforcements, or destroy the road or railway south of Indaw.[117] Aberdeen was also abandoned.[118]

Wingate's death on 24 March caused Special Force to change commander but the operation continued.[119] The remaining three brigades roamed near Indaw and fought local engagements, but IJA attacks eventually forced the abandonment of White City. On 6 April an IJA Independent Mixed Brigade attacked 77 Brigade by shelling the airstrip and employing infantry assaults, causing six days of 'confused battle' as the defenders, attacking IJA infantry, and counter-attackers fought each other.[120] On 15 - 18 April the IJA 'launched a most determined attack' that penetrated the perimeter', reaching a nearby hill which was barely repulsed.[121] Fighting ultimately repelled the IJA brigade, but left 77 Brigade severely weakened.[122] Two weeks later White City was abandoned, and in early May many of the remaining men from 3 West African, 77 and 14 brigades moved northward to the Blackpool stronghold near Hobin to join 111 Brigade.[123] With a weakened force and a new commander, the move to Blackpool signalled what 'was really the end of the Chindits'.[124] Before it was possible to build

[114]Collier, *The War in the Far East,* p. 420.
[115]Rooney, *Burma Victory,* p. 129.
[116]Slim, *Defeat Into Victory,* p. 270. 16 Brigade withdrew to India, but some remained under 77 Brigade command until 22 April. IWM, Private Papers of Colonel F O Cave OBE MC item 1/11 Document 10558, 'Diary of Colonel F.O. Cave', 17 April 1943-10 May 1944, p. 87; TNA WO 172/4395.
[117]Rooney, *Burma Victory,* p. 131.
[118]TNA WO 203/138 3 Indian Division: Situation Reports 1944 March – July, '3 Ind Div Own Tps SITREP No. 38 to 1900 hrs 7 May, from FOURTEENTH ARMY'.
[119]Costello, *The Pacific War,* p. 465. Wingate was replaced by Major General W.D.A. Lentaigne, who was the 111 Brigade Commander.
[120]TNA WO 203/138 3 Indian Division: Situation Reports 1944 March, '3 DIV OWN TPS SITREP 19 to 1200 hrs 18 APR'; quote from Rooney, *Burma Victory,* p, 135.
[121]Thompson, *The Book of the War in Burma,* p. 256; WO 203/138, '3 DIV OWN TPS SITREP 19 to 1200 hrs 18 APR.
[122]Jesse Shaw, *Special Force: A Chindit's Story,* (Gloucester, England: Alan Sutton, 1986), p. 187; see also Rooney, *Burma Victory,* p. 135.
[123]Slim, *Defeat Into Victory,* p. 270.
[124]Rooney, *Burma Victory,* p. 136.

Blackpool into a full stronghold, the 'Japanese attacked in strength'.[125] Special Force brigades became increasingly factionalised, and by mid-May the columns 'were in considerable disarray'.[126] Over the next few weeks the brigades struggled, fighting the IJA near Blackpool and eventually this rendered them 'combat ineffective' and Blackpool was abandoned.[127] After a command reorganisation on 17 May, Special Force units were used in a standard infantry role in fighting near Mogaung where they managed to cut the railway to Myitkyina. This effort rendered 77 Brigade 'no longer an effective fighting force' after it had suffered 800 dead and wounded, with only about 300 'who could walk, let alone march'.[128] Casualties and exhaustion had rendered the remaining units 'not fit to continue operating'.[129] The Special Force was finally withdrawn with 77 Brigade in July, leaving only the 3 West Africa to patrol and 111 Brigade to consolidate.[130]

Overall, the Special Force suffered approximately 3,606 casualties with 1,034 killed and 2,572 wounded, losing approximately one-fifth of its total strength. In addition, 'most of those who survived never fought again' due to sickness and malnutrition.[131] This loss of over 20% rendered the survivors combat ineffective, and by the end of Operation Thursday the force 'was so reduced by casualties and sickness… that its rehabilitation became impossible'.[132] The Special Force would not conduct another long-range penetration, and in February 1945, the Long-Range Penetration Groups ceased to exist.

Operation Thursday must be considered a failure. The Special Force 'failed to produce the results its creators hoped for' when it proved unable to achieve the critical objectives near Indaw, notably securing the airfields.[133] All the strongholds and blocks were abandoned earlier than planned after they proved to be unsustainable, and events in general failed to develop as predicted. The Special Force's multiple brigades, essentially the equivalent of two divisions, delivered no significant setbacks to the IJA forces in northern Burma. Rather, the force spent a large amount of time and effort moving, establishing positions, and trying to survive as setbacks accumulated and cascaded. Only one brigade achieved its specific objectives, 77 Brigade, but even that

[125]Ibid.
[126]McLynn, *The Burma Campaign,* pp. 342, 344.
[127]Millett and Murray, *A War to be Won*, p. 230.
[128]McLynn, *The Burma Campaign,* p. 352. Allen*, Burma*, p. 369.
[129]Slim, *Defeat Into Victory,* p. 280.
[130]TNA WO 203/138, 3 Indian Division: Situation Reports, 1944 March – July, '3730 SITREP from 3 Ind Div to Main & Adv 11 Army Gp'.
[131]McLynn, *The Burma Campaign,* p. 360.
[132]Kirby, *India's Most Dangerous Hour,* p. 446.
[133]Kirby, India's Most Dangerous Hour, pp. 444-445.

proved unsustainable. 16 Brigade, unsupported, failed in the critical attack against Indaw's airfields which had to be abandoned. 111 Brigade also failed to establish an effective block against the IJA. The insertion of the second wave produced no significant improvements. Unable to coordinate, the three brigade attack at Indaw, the brigades had to fight alone or as smaller columns. Almost immediately 111 Brigade had to split after the failed river crossing, and 16 Brigade fought only once as a brigade sized unit at the disaster near Indaw. Inserting 3 West African Brigade and 14 Brigade failed to improve inter-brigade cooperation or the division's ability to combine effects. These failures indicated larger problems regarding adaptation between the first and second operation. Critically, the Special Force had sacrificed mobility when it adopted the new strongholds but did so without gaining sufficient capability to repel attacking IJA units. This new role rendered Special Force more vulnerable to IJA firepower while also removing one of their key advantages - moving speedily and unnoticed. The IJA identified the force's units faster than expected, could repulse attacks, and could attack the strongholds with greater effect than predicted. Adapting its doctrine to incorporate the stronghold concept reduced Special Force's overall effectiveness and exacerbated its ability to react to setbacks.

Conclusions

The Special Force's adaptations in 1943 and 1944 indicate how concepts that develop in isolation within a unit may contribute to failure. Put simply, planners predicted incorrectly. Then, without a rigorous evaluation of their beliefs or assumptions, inappropriate ideas were incorporated and contributed to future battlefield losses. Prior to the first operation there was no comprehensive vetting of ideas outside the brigade, and only a limited evaluation of ideas within. 77 Indian Brigade did not participate in any formal institutional mechanism for information collection, integration, evaluation, or assessment outside of the unit. There was an initial resistance to LRP as a concept in the summer of 1942 at GHQ India and 'a long wrestle with authority', but once LRP had been endorsed by the Commander in Chief, Wavell, the brigade prepared for operations autonomously and with its core concepts and doctrine unchallenged.[134]

Without a formal doctrine or any external participation by it in wider doctrinal development underway elsewhere at the time, the LRPG trained independently with their own processes and without any systematic assessment from a higher authority.[135] This autonomy allowed ideas and decisions to be considered and disseminated through the brigade, primarily by the commander, Wingate, with his directives addressing specific needs rather than reflecting a deeper reconceptualisation of LRP. Additionally,

[134]Sykes, *Orde Wingate*, p. 368.
[135]Moreman, *Chindit*, 12-13.

the brigade exercises held in September and December 1942 occurred without any significant external evaluation or higher level assessment.

Findings from the LRPG's evolution into Special Force and its second operation suggest how the absence of an external, higher authority to assess information may contribute to adapting badly and lead to battlefield failure. After facing setbacks in the first operation related to insufficient relative firepower against the IJA's 18 Division, the resulting prescription from Special Force of strongholds with floater columns proved incorrect (or too difficult to execute). Even when expanded to an enlarged division there was still no comprehensive vetting of LRP ideas from outside the unit. Avoiding the formal doctrinal change occurring in other parts of the Indian Army, LRPG command led its own evaluation with recommendations issued via intra-unit training memorandums that supported the LRPG's core tenets while expanding their role, purpose, and mission.[136] Once the stronghold concept was endorsed, there was limited external formal review despite the significantly increased requirements in personnel, resources, and air assets. The concept of defensive strongholds supported from air was not completely flawed. From mid-1943 the Indian Army began adapting the defensive box concept used in North Africa into a larger defensive pivot system supported by mobile strike forces, and this was implemented effectively against IJA infiltration and encirclement in Arakan in 1944 at the Battle of the Admin Box.[137] However, the variant used by Special Force brigades with 300 men columns as a strike force proved inappropriate to achieving its goals.

If future conflicts develop into a race to recover from surprise, the case of Special Force warns of the cost of adapting poorly. It also shows the critical risk during rapid wartime change from not learning what causes failure. The two operations of the LRPG indicate how the absence of an external authority that assesses, evaluates, and oversees the implementation of new ideas may cause organisations to rely on their own untested concepts which can contribute to an unnecessary loss in lives and resources. Future military planners and decision makers would be well-served by remembering the example of Special Force where flawed wartime adaptation exacerbated failure.

[136]IWM 91/9/1, 'The Stronghold'.
[137]Carter Malkasian, *A History of Modern Wars of Attrition,* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002), p. 106.