

British Journal for Military History

Volume 8, Issue 1, March 2022

Review of *The 1945 Burma Campaign and the Transformation of the British Indian Army* by Raymond A Callahan & Daniel Marston

George Wilton

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 17 March 2022

Citation: George Wilton, 'Review of *The 1945 Burma Campaign and the Transformation of the British Indian Army* by Raymond A Callahan & Daniel Marston', *British Journal for Military History*, 8.1 (2022), pp. 182-184.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

This book is a triumph of scholarship, and better still an engagingly written one. It will, deservedly, become a classic text.

GEORGE WILTON
Independent Scholar, UK
DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v8i1.1618

Raymond A Callahan & Daniel Marston, *The 1945 Burma Campaign and the Transformation of the British Indian Army*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2020. ix+280 pp. including: Preface, Map, Figures, Bibliography & Index. ISBN: 978-0700630417 (hardback). Price £34.50.

In one respect the title is misleading, the authors do cover Burma in 1945 but there is also an excellent chapter on the Indian Army's activities in French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies following the Japanese surrender.

Before opening the book my first thoughts were how the authors might explain some lines taken from the closing part of John Masters' 'The Road Past Mandalay'. Better known as an author of fiction, Masters was a pre-war Indian Army officer, then a Chindit, and by 1945 a staff officer in Burma with 19 Indian Division. He wrote, not only of the Indian Army's victory in Burma in 1945, but of profound change in that army, and the nation from which it came when he said:

'Twenty races, a dozen religions, a score of languages passed in those trucks and tanks.'

'It was all summed up in the voice of an Indian colonel of artillery. The Indian army had not been allowed to possess any field artillery from the time of the Mutiny (1857) until just before the Second World War. Now the Indian, bending close to an English Colonel over a map, straightened and said with a smile, OK George. Thanks. I've got it. We'll take over all tasks at 1800. What about a beer?'

Could Callahan and Marston explain how Masters' pre-war Indian Army of some 200,000 had become by 1945 an all-volunteer force of 2.5 million? Could they also explain how it had risen above abject defeat in 1942, and a debacle in Arakan in 1943, to successfully defend India in 1944, and by 1945 inflict on the Imperial Japanese Army the worst land defeat in its history?

REVIEWS

We should not forget that victory in Burma in 1945 was achieved by an army of Indians. There were British too of course, and by 1945 also three divisions and two independent brigades of East and West Africans who outnumbered them. The authors give welcome space and credit to this story as well when they say, 'historical fairness requires remembering that more African divisions than British helped Slim back to Rangoon.'

Transformation appears in the title and was wisely chosen. Callahan deftly provides the campaign history in just the right amount of detail to give Marston the opportunity to operationalise his knowledge of the Indian Army. Their efforts are seamless.

How the army was retrained, not just once from a frontier force to jungle fighters, but a second time from that jungle to a combined arms manoeuvrist force is described in the book. The scale of transformation is also brought home by there being only 577 Indian Commissioned Officers in 1939 but 15,000 of the Indian Army's 43,000 in 1945; and officers with equal powers of command, opportunity, and pay, unlike those of 1939. Transformation can be seen in one of the first brigades joining the occupation force in Japan coming from the Indian Army, and with an Indian brigadier in command. Transformation indeed.

The authors have not shied away either from recording Churchill's prejudices, his unreasonable demands, his surprising lack of understanding of India and of the remote nature of the campaign. Moreover, they note that Churchill saw the campaign as justified only by the need to assuage his American ally. The work also demonstrates the viciousness of the Imperial political world, evidenced in 1943 by the political maelstrom that circled around Bill Slim following the Arakan debacle. Slim survived an attempt to sack him even though he had not directly planned or controlled the Arakan campaign – but survive he did - unlike some who had tried to scapegoat Slim to protect and advance themselves. Chapter 5 offers an excellent synopsis of Slim's unexpected sacking, and almost instant reinstatement in May 1945, following another political attack by at least one jealous superior. The authors skilfully weave such political threads through the book and it is richer for that.

The authors capably describe the extreme difficulty of fighting in the grim, unhealthy, inhospitable terrain of Burma, in terrible weather, with impossible logistics, and an enemy who really did fight to the death. They describe how, with previously hard-won air supremacy, the ground forces relied on air supply when there were no roads, or when they had been washed away, or when surrounded at Meiktila in March 1945. The authors highlight how dependent XIV Army had become on air supply by March 1945 when RAF and USAAF transport aircraft were flying 196 and 204 hours/month

respectively. Impressively, the two air forces were operating aircraft from Toungoo only four days after its capture.

Notable in the text is the ability of the Indian Army of 1945 to form ad hoc mobile columns of tanks and infantry that encircled and reduced Japanese positions. The building of all round defensive boxes at night was a tactic retained from jungle fighting, but it was combined with a new mobile flexibility, and mobile artillery, to inflict disproportionately severe casualties on the Japanese. That new flexibility says much of how Slim's army had been transformed from the defeated army of 1942, or the victorious but defensive army of Kohima and Imphal in 1944. The authors quote Slim, 'my Indian divisions after 1943 were amongst the best in the world. They would go anywhere, do anything, go on doing it, and do it on very little.' Undoubtedly there is some hyperbole but much truth also. By March 1945 Indian Officers were commanding battalions and were present at senior level in brigade and divisional staffs. Earlier British prejudices and doubts were being overcome.

As the authors say, 'World War II turned a cautious embrace of change into a torrent of adaptation. By 1945 the Indian Army was a modern force in its equipment, doctrine and tactics', and the authors had by the end of the book answered the tests set for them with this review.

Sadly this book will not become the best seller it and the authors deserve, but scholars of the war in Burma and the Indian Army will find much of value in this excellent work.

GEORGE WILTON
Independent Scholar, UK
DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v8i1.1619

Volker Ullrich (trans. Jefferson Chase), *Eight Days in May*. London: Penguin Books, 2021. 271 pp. 1 map, 24 black and white photographs. ISBN: 978-0241467268 (hardback). Price £25.00.

There are few Second World War topics that have attracted more public interest than the death of Adolf Hitler in the Berlin *Führerbunker* on 30 April 1945. Although this was an iconic moment, marking the end of a twelve-year reign of terror, the Second World War in Europe rumbled on for a further eight days - a period fraught with uncertainties. It was during these eight days that Germany's transition from a Nazi state began and the fate of countless millions of people began to be settled. In a