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Research Essay

**GENERAL SLIM'S FAILURE AND SUCCESS IN GENERALSHIP
AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL**

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Advanced Military Studies Course 1

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November 1998

GENERAL SLIM'S FAILURE AND SUCCESS IN GENERALSHIP AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL

Preparation for war is an expensive, burdensome business, yet there is one important part of it that costs little – study. However changed and strange the new conditions of war may be, not only generals, but politicians and ordinary citizens, may find there is much to be learned from the past that can be applied to the future and, in their search for it, that some campaigns have more than others foreshadowed the coming pattern of modern war. I believe ours in Burma was one of those.

Slim¹

Introduction

The object of war is to impose one's own will upon the enemy. Operations or battles to defeat the enemy are carried out by units and formations all working to a strategic goal. The battles are fought, won, or lost by sections, platoons, companies, battalions, brigades, divisions, corps, armies, and army groups. Regardless of the size of the organization involved in the battle, they all have a common element, and that is a superior who issued the orders. Whether the commander is a sergeant or a general, he

¹ Slim, Field-Marshal Viscount, GCB, GCMG, GCVD, GBE, DSO, MC. Defeat Into Victory. London: PAPERMAC, 1986. 535. A large number of the footnotes for this paper are taken from Slim's book. Defeat Into Victory is one of the best written accounts of the Burmese campaign and is recognized as the unofficial history of the British campaign in Burma. During his tenure as Governor General in Australia, while Slim was writing his book, he was in constant contact with the authors of the official British war history of the Burma Campaign. Slim was asked to proof their manuscripts for accuracy. See Lewin, Ronald. Slim The Standardbearer. London: Leo Cooper Ltd., 1990, Chapter 17.

has to take the orders received from his superior and translate them into orders to be carried out by the soldiers under his command. At the lowest level, it could be as simple as ‘We will do a right flanking’. At the highest level it could be complicated by the addition of political concerns such as ‘In achieving your mission, keep in mind the political sensitivities of our allies’. The skill of translating this strategic direction into meaningful military action at the tactical level is often referred to as the operational art.² It is the application of the operational art that identifies the good commander, someone who can “... understand the current state of the battlefield, ... communicating intent and making the desired end state a reality.”³ A commander who can successfully accomplish this is likely to defeat his enemy. A commander who cannot accomplish this is likely to be defeated.

A commander’s understanding of the operational art can be enhanced by the study of war. To paraphrase Slim, the study of war is the cheapest way to understand war. There is a great deal to be learned from the past that is applicable to the future. To examine the reasons for winning and losing at the operational level, World War II provides many theatres of operation and many commanders from which to choose.

² Canadian doctrine describes operational art as “... the skill of translating strategic direction into operational and tactical action. It is that vital link between the setting of military strategic objectives and the tactical employment of forces on the battlefield through the skilful execution of command at the operational level. ... In its simplest expression, operational art determines when, where, and for what purpose major forces will fight. ... Using operational art, the commander applies intellect to the situation in order to establish and transmit a vision for the accomplishment of the strategic objective.” CONDUCT OF LAND OPERATIONS – OPERATIONAL DOCTRINE FOR THE CANADIAN ARMY B-GL-300-001/FP-000. National Defence, Canada 1996-09-15, pages 4-1 to 4-2.

³ Reisweber, Major Deborah, US Army. “Battle Command: Will We Have It When We Need It?” Military Review. Vol LXXVII, No. 5. 49. In her article, Major Reisweber refers to this as Battle Command.

For the purposes of this paper, the Burma Theatre provides a particularly good setting. From the Allied point of view, it encompassed defeat, victory, joint, and combined operations. Additionally, one commander is present throughout. Slim⁴ was brought into the Burma Theatre, in March 1942 during the long retreat, and given command of a Corps. He ended the campaign as Allied Land Force Commander, having contributed greatly to the defeat of the Japanese Forces in Burma.

Slim's success in the battle for Burma was based upon his understanding of what had contributed to the initial defeat of the British Forces in Burma, and his application of these lessons in the successful conduct of the subsequent campaign at the operational level. The remainder of this paper will examine Slim's leadership in the Burma Theatre of Operations from the initial defeat, through the rebuilding of the British Forces, and finally to victory.

⁴ In 1942, when he was appointed to command what was to become Burma Corps, Slim was an acting Lieutenant-General. He had joined the Birmingham University OTC in 1912 and enrolled in the Army in 1914 for the Great War. He was wounded twice during the War and in 1919, as a temporary Major, transferred from the British to the Indian Army. At the outbreak of World War II, having commanded the 2/7th Gurkhas, he was promoted Brigadier in command of 10 Indian Brigade. He was wounded in Eritrea in operations against the Italians and evacuated to India. In June 1941 he was promoted acting Major-General and commanded a division in operations in Iraq, Syria and Iran. He had not been a particularly spectacular commander, achieving only limited successes in these commands, however the campaigns provided him experience and seasoning which he brought with him to Burma. For a short over view of Slim's life, please see Anderson, Duncan. "Slim." In Keegan, John, ed. Churchill's Generals. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1991.

Burma – The Defeat – An Historical Overview⁵⁶

Not long after the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the armies of the Japanese Empire began their invasion of Burma. On 16 December 1941, they crossed into Burma from Thailand and shortly thereafter captured an important airfield at Victoria Point. Using the airfield as a base of operations, the Japanese 15th Army pushed Northward. Their objectives were to:

- sever the Burma Road supply route to China;
- seize Mandalay;
- threaten the Eastern states of India;
- cut British links between India and Malaya;
- isolate the Chinese Nationalist Forces of Chiang Kai-shek from their allies;
- secure the Burmese oil fields;⁷ and
- destroy the British forces.⁸

Their long-term plan called for the establishment of a firm base in Burma for the invasion of India.

⁵ Pimlott, John. The Historical Atlas of World War II. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995. The information for this part has been taken almost exclusively from this reference. 94.

⁶ See map at end of paper.

⁷ Pimlott, 94.

⁸ Slim, 118.

Two British Divisions (1st Burma and 17th Indian) under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Hutton⁹ defended against the advances of the Japanese 15th Army. The 17th Division was trained for desert warfare and the "... 1st Burma Division was made up of three brigades which had no collective training and which were short of artillery, engineers and transport. The forces were extremely short of aircraft...."^{10 11} Their overall standards of training were mediocre and no match for the tactics employed by the Japanese. Their equipment was poor and they were heavily reliant on the Burmese road system. Although plans were developed for a strategic withdrawal to a defensible line behind the Sittang River, the senior commander, General Archibald Wavell¹², "... would not allow this claiming it would destroy morale."¹³

When the Japanese commenced their offensive, panic broke out amongst the defenders. The 17th Indian Division was poorly deployed to meet the onslaught and gradually withdrew behind the Sittang River. Disaster after disaster occurred. The single bridge across the Sittang was ordered destroyed by the commander 17th Division, Major-General J.G. Smyth, as the 48th Brigade was crossing it "... leaving two-thirds of the

⁹ Hutton was Commander, Army in Burma. Slim, 10.

¹⁰ Keegan, John, ed. The Rand McNally Encyclopedia of World War II. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1977. 43.

¹¹ The explanation for this apparent lack of preparedness on the part of the British Forces is mentioned later in the paper. For more information, the reader is directed to Slim's Defeat Into Victory, chapters 1 to 3.

¹² At this point in time, Archibald Percival Wavell (later Field-Marshal Earl Wavell) was C-in-C India, an appointment held since 22 June 1941. On 3 January 1942 he relinquished command as C-in-C India and was appointed Supreme Allied Commander, South West Pacific (American, British, Dutch and Australian, ABDA Command) which supposedly embraced all Allied forces in Burma, Singapore, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, the Philippines and from 24 January, North-West Australia. Hutton reported to Wavell as the commander of the Army in Burma. Beckett, Ian. "Wavell." In Keegan, John, ed. Churchill's Generals. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1991. 70, 80-81, 87.

¹³ Keegan, 44.

brigade to swim across.”¹⁴ Hutton ordered the evacuation of Rangoon, which eventually cost him his job as Wavell replaced him with Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Alexander.¹⁵

After the occupation of Rangoon, the Japanese continued with their offensive pushing the British back towards the Irrawaddy River. At this point, Chiang Kai-shek intervened to assist his allies and sent a small Chinese force, under the command of Lieutenant-General Joseph (Vinegar Joe) Stilwell, South into Burma.

As the situation rapidly deteriorated it was decided to form a Corps from 1st Burma Division and 17th Indian Division to ease the command and control responsibilities of General Alexander. The command of the Corps was given to Lieutenant-General Slim who reported directly to Alexander.

Slim took over Burma Corps on 14 March 1942.¹⁶ Within two days of taking command of the Corps, he noted several factors that detracted from the British’s ability to achieve success. These were a lack of intelligence; inadequate training and equipment for jungle operations; low combat strength; unfriendly Burmese; inadequate mutual support between formations and poor morale.¹⁷

Slim knew what was wrong; however, as he said:

¹⁴ Keegan, 44.

¹⁵ In February 1942, Alexander (the Hon. Harold Rupert Leofric George Alexander, later Field-Marshal Earl Alexander) took over as Commander, Army in Burma, from Hutton, which Slim, in retrospect, regarded as an impossible mission. In this position he had to deal with the British Allies, in particular the Chinese, commanded by General Stilwell. Reid, Brian Holden, “Alexander.” In Keegan, John, ed. Churchill’s Generals. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1991. 105, 110-111, 129

¹⁶ Anderson, Duncan. “Slim.” In Keegan, John, ed. Churchill’s Generals. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1991. 321.

¹⁷ Slim, 28 – 30.

It is one thing to know what is wrong; it is another to put it right. I have no doubt that Hutton, if he had been given even a few months in which to prepare, would have corrected much of this and a lot more too. But I was to find, as he had, that to retrieve the past in the midst of a fierce and relentless present is no easy matter.¹⁸

Slim was right. On 30 March 1942, after very heavy fighting, the Chinese, no match for the Japanese onslaught, were forced to withdraw. General Alexander ordered his forces to withdraw to the Northwest across the Burmese central plain. The Japanese followed up the British withdrawal and quickly captured the Burmese oilfields at Yenangyaung, hastening the British retreat. On 1 May 1942, the rearguard of the Burma Corps crossed the Irrawaddy River and blew the bridge behind them. The Japanese carried on with their offensive and soon seized Mandalay. Burma was effectively in Japanese hands.

The battle was not over for the British, however. Continuing to withdraw towards the Indian border, they used all available means of transport. When these failed, they walked. To complicate matters, the monsoon season burst on them on 12 May.¹⁹ The soldiers continued to withdraw. As Slim recalls:

Ploughing their way up slopes, over a track inches deep in slippery mud, soaked to the skin, rotten with fever, ill fed and

¹⁸ Slim, 31.

¹⁹ Slim, 109.

shivering as the air grew cooler, the troops went on, hour after hour, day after day. Their only rest at night was to lie on the sodden ground under the dripping trees, without even a blanket to cover them. Yet the monsoon which so nearly destroyed us and whose rain beat so mercilessly on our bodies did us one good turn – it stopped dead the Japanese pursuit. ... On the last day of the nine-hundred-mile retreat I stood on a bank beside the road and watched the rearguard march into India. All of them, British, Indian, and Gurhka, were gaunt and ragged as scarecrows. Yet as they trudged behind their surviving officers in groups pitifully small, they still carried their arms and kept their ranks, they were still recognizable as fighting units. They might look like scarecrows, but they looked like soldiers too.²⁰

The first battle for Burma was complete. The Japanese had prevailed, but they had failed to destroy the British fighting force. Burma Corps had lost "... over 13,000 men and had the dubious privilege of having conducted the longest retreat in the history of the British Army. Recovery would take a lot of effort and time."²¹

²⁰ Slim, 109-110.

²¹ Pimlott, 94.

Burma – The Defeat – Operational Factors That Contributed to the Defeat²²

Once back in India, Slim had a chance to reflect on what had gone wrong. He allowed that:

The outstanding and incontrovertible fact was that we had taken a thorough beating. We, the Allies, had been outmanoeuvred, outfought, and outgeneralled. It was easy, of course, as it always is, to find excuses for our failure, but excuses are no use for the next time; what is wanted are causes and remedies.²³

The operational reasons for failure can be grouped as follows:

- Strategic direction;
- Preparation
- Sustainment; and
- Generalship.²⁴

Strategic Direction. No one in the military or civilian chain of command had expected a Japanese invasion of Burma until it was too late. Those responsible, both civilian and military leaders, may have been concerned with strategic matters in other parts of the world, but no one took firm responsibility for the defence of Burma. There

²² Slim, 115-121. The Operational Factors That Contributed to the Defeat are taken from this part of Slim's book.

²³ Slim, 115.

²⁴ Slim, 116-119.

was no political or military strategic guidance from which the commanders on the ground could develop operational and tactical level plans for the coming onslaught. Because of this lack of preparation, “[t]he two great errors that grew from this were the military separation of Burma from India and the division of operational from administrative control.”²⁵ These errors did not allow for the “... continued unity of command in spite of the friction, chaos and uncertainty of [the] conflict.”²⁶ These oversights resulted in a campaign plan that was based on fundamental errors in organization and, without an overwhelming superiority of troops and materiel, was doomed to failure. This lack of sound direction continued during the actual fighting. For example, when General Alexander had arrived in theatre, he had orders to hold Rangoon. “On his arrival he found the decisive battle of the campaign, the Sittang bridge, had already been lost, and with it the fate of Rangoon sealed.”²⁷ Slim summed up the dilemma of the commanders when he stated:

It was then that we needed from the highest national authority a clear direction of what was to be our purpose in Burma. Were we to risk all in a desperate attempt to destroy the Japanese Army and recover all that has been lost? Ought we to fight to the end on some line to retain at least a part of Burma? Or was our task to withdraw slowly, keeping our forces intact, while the defence of India was prepared? Had we been given any one of these as our

²⁵ Slim, 115.

²⁶ B-GL-300-001/FP-000, page 4-7.

²⁷ Slim, 118

great overall object it would have had an effect, not only on the major tactics of the campaign, but on the morale of the troops. No such directive was ever received.... Whoever was responsible, there was no doubt that we had been weakened basically by this lack of a clear object.²⁸

Preparation. The troops chosen for the operation were not adequate in numbers and had not been properly prepared for the operations they were to undertake. The 17th Division had been equipped and trained for the desert. The 1st Burma Division was made up of raw, inexperienced and unreliable Burmese troops. Neither of these Divisions had been adequately trained to fight in the jungle. The jungle was seen as an unfriendly place, almost as dangerous as the enemy was. It was considered impenetrable, especially to troops that relied on wheeled transport to survive. On the other hand, the Japanese used the jungle to their advantage. If the British had been trained to operate in the jungle, they "...could have, if not defeated the Japanese, at least made a much better fight of it with even the small force of reliable troops [they] possessed...."²⁹

The Burmese civil government had not taken adequate measures to prepare or educate the people for the possibility of a war. When it became evident that there would be a war, the civil authorities were reluctant to organize evacuation schemes, refugee control, intelligence machinery, and the militarization of the railways, or anything in the nature of a Home Guard. There was a fear that if the people were told unpleasant things

²⁸ Slim, 118-119

²⁹ Slim, 115.

about an unpleasant situation they might become depressed and panic. Therefore, no one was prepared for war and the series of British defeats was a stunning surprise.³⁰

“Tactically [the British] had been completely outclassed.”³¹ The Japanese, on encountering British resistance, would leave a holding force to occupy them. They would then move around a flank and establish a blocking position behind the British. These tactics were more often than not successful and British Commanders and troops “began to develop a road block mentality which often developed into an inferiority complex.”³² The Japanese tactics were not new or innovative and there were many ways to deal with them, had the British not been ‘road bound’ and lacking in the tactical ability to do so. As Slim states, “[e]quipped and trained as we were in 1942, we had no satisfactory answer to the Japanese road-block.”³³ Although they had difficulty in dealing with the roadblocks, the British Forces were eventually able to withdraw.

The air force was also not prepared for the Japanese assault. The Japanese air force quickly dominated the skies. “The main destruction [of the British Air Force] happened on the ground, at Magwe, owing to bad dispersal on the airfield.”³⁴ The planes that were not destroyed had to be withdrawn as their airfields were threatened or overrun. Eventually the skies over the battlefields belonged solely to the Japanese. This resulted in inadequate air support for the army on the ground, and was a major disadvantage for

³⁰ Slim, 115.

³¹ Slim, 119.

³² Slim, 119.

³³ Slim, 120.

³⁴ Lewin, Ronald. Slim The Standardbearer. London: Leo Cooper Ltd., 1990, 85.

the British. They had lost one of their most important combat functions³⁵ which hampered Slim's ability to "... produce maximum combat power."³⁶ This lack of air support, combined with the inadequacy of the army on the ground, contributed to the overall defeat.

The British intelligence system was poor to non-existent. The air force could not be relied upon to provide information about the enemy. The army did not have light mobile reconnaissance units that could live in the jungle and report on the movements of the Japanese. According to Slim the "...extreme inefficiency of our whole intelligence system in Burma was probably our greatest single handicap."³⁷

Sustainment. The Army in Burma was supported through the ports of Rangoon. When Rangoon fell and the Army was forced to withdraw towards India, the lack of a metalled road³⁸ between Burma and India exacerbated the supply of the Army. Its ability to sustain itself was almost non-existent.

Generalship. To Slim,

the most disastrous aspect of the whole campaign had been the contrast between our generalship and the enemy's. The Japanese leadership was conf

they lose the initiative. ... Their object, clear and definite, was the destruction of our forces; ours a rather nebulous idea of retaining territory. This led to the initial dispersion of our forces over wide areas, an error we continued to commit, and worse still it led to a defensive attitude of mind.³⁹

Slim also dealt with his failings as a commander. As a general, he felt he had not been successful. He felt that he had been unable to take effective offensive action against the Japanese. In his own words he states:

I should have subordinated all else to the vital need to strike at them and thus disrupt their plans, but I ought, in spite of everything and at all risks, to have collected the whole strength of my corps before I attempted any counter-offensive. Thus I might have risked disaster, but I was more likely to have achieved success. When in doubt as to two courses of action, a general should choose the bolder. I reproached myself now that I had not. In preparation, in execution, in strategy, and in tactics we had been worsted, and we had paid the penalty – defeat.⁴⁰

In summary, the Japanese had outfought their enemy. The British lack of strategic and operational preparedness contributed greatly to their defeat.

³⁹ Slim, 118.

⁴⁰ Slim, 121.

Rebuilding the Weapon

In October 1943⁴¹, Lieutenant-General Slim was given command of Fourteenth Army. He immediately identified sustainment (supply), health, and morale as his three biggest areas of concern. He began to implement a number of measures to improve these, and by extension, the fighting efficiency of the army.

Sustainment. The first thing Slim did to address the sustainment problem was to appoint Major-General Snelling his Major-General in charge of Administration. In Burma, supply was reliant on good communications. Measures were taken to improve the railway, increase supply by river and to improve what roads were available. The roads were built:

...with bricks, millions and millions of them. Every twenty miles or so was a great brick kiln.... We imported skilled brick workers from India, brought the necessary coal by rail, boat, and lorry and baked our bricks. A brick road is terribly apt in rain to sink into the earth, but constantly having fresh bricks relaid, it held, a monument to ingenuity and determination.⁴²

This is but one example of the ingenuity used to attack the supply problems. As was stated earlier, Slim chose Snelling to address the problems and as he stated, the

⁴¹ In May 1942, Slim was given command of XV Corps in India. He commanded this formation in limited actions in Burma and civil action in India prior to commanding Fourteenth Army. Anderson 321-322 and chapter 16.

⁴² Slim, 172.

...task was an immense one, and, having discussed it fully with him and selected the key men to work under him, I gave him a very free hand to carry it out. Soon, under his energetic direction, there were signs of improvement, and, while my anxieties on the supply side remained, I could see for myself wherever I went that our difficulties were being grappled with throughout the army and that we were getting increasing understanding and help from India.⁴³

Slim understood that if he were to win the upcoming battles with the Japanese, he would have to be able to adequately sustain his army. What he and Snelling could not get through normal channels, they found through improvisation. In Slim's words:

... quick brains and willing hands could, from meagre resources, produce astonishing results. Our mass production river shipyards, our methods of building roads and airfields, our parajutes, our huge market gardens almost in the battle line, our duck farms, our fish saltings, and a hundred other things were gallant and successful efforts by the army in the field to live up to its motto, 'God helps those who help themselves.'⁴⁴

Health. Disease was a major concern throughout the campaign, especially malaria. Slim had to find a method to improve the health of his soldiers. He addressed

⁴³ Slim, 176.

⁴⁴ Slim, 540-541. Slim found an Indian firm that could produce almost anything out of jute. To address the shortage of parachutes for air resupply, Slim had the company produce parachutes out of jute – parajutes.

this concern in four areas: application of the latest medical research; forward treatment of the sick; air evacuation of serious casualties and improving morale.⁴⁵

To address some of the more pressing problems, Slim introduced Malaria Forward Treatment Units. These units treated malaria casualties close to their formations and reduced the time required for a soldier to return to his unit from five months or more, to about 3-4 weeks.⁴⁶ As well, for the wounded, forward surgical teams were introduced. Nurses were sent farther forward into the battle area than was the norm. Air evacuation of the seriously wounded direct to hospitals greatly reduced the mortality rate. One such hospital took in over eleven thousand British casualties. The total deaths in that hospital were twenty-three. Air evacuation did more in the Fourteenth Army to save lives than any other agency.⁴⁷

The fight against disease also required good unit discipline to ensure that soldiers took the required medicine to fight the disease. Slim instituted a policy of checking entire units to ensure that every man was taking the required medicine. If less than 95% of the unit had taken the required medicine, he would fire the commanding officer for lack of leadership. He stated that “I only had to sack three: by then the rest had got my meaning.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Slim, 178.

⁴⁶ Slim 178.

⁴⁷ Slim, 180.

⁴⁸ Slim, 180.

Morale. Upon taking command of Fourteenth Army, Slim found morale at “a dangerously low ebb.”⁴⁹ He identified what he considered were his principles of morale stating them as the spiritual, intellectual and material.⁵⁰

Slim allowed that “[i]t was one thing to marshal my principles but quite another to develop them, apply them, and get them recognized by the whole army.”⁵¹ The spiritual foundation of the army was considered by Slim to be good, both religiously and in the Army’s belief in their noble cause, the defeat of the Japanese Army. He set about to improve the intellectual and the material principles.

Slim took a straightforward approach in dealing with these concerns by talking directly to the soldiers of Fourteenth Army, and encouraging his commanders to continue doing so. As he stated, “[w]henver I could get away from my headquarters, and that throughout the campaign was about a third of the time, I was in these first few months more like a parliamentary candidate than a general – except that I never made a promise.”⁵² Slim wanted to ensure that the soldiers of the army felt that:

... they shared directly in the triumphs of Fourteenth Army and that its success and its honour were in their hands as much as anybody’s. Another way in which we made every man feel he was part of the show was by keeping him, whatever his rank, as far as

⁴⁹ Slim, 181.

⁵⁰ Slim, 182-183.

⁵¹ Slim, 183.

⁵² Slim, 184.

was practicable in the picture of what was going on around him.

...It was in these ways that we laid the spiritual foundations...⁵³

Slim had a major impact on his soldiers. In his biography on Slim, Lewin states that:

... words would have remained words, without the man. Soldiers are skeptical of mere words. It was during these peregrinations⁵⁴, however, that his Army began to think of Lieut[enant]-General Slim as Uncle Bill. ... Uncle Bill they came to see, was theirs and they were his, linked in the brotherhood of battle. His evident grasp of the present offered them hope for the future. His message was that enshrined in the famous motto of the Royal Tank Regiment: 'From mud through blood to the green fields beyond.'⁵⁵

Slim also had to convince the army that they could defeat the Japanese soldiers and, in so doing, to destroy the myth of the Japanese superman. Victories elsewhere, such as the Australian victory in New Guinea⁵⁶, helped in these efforts. However, the Fourteenth Army needed its own victories. The army had to get the feeling that it was "[they] who were hunting the Jap, not he us."⁵⁷

⁵³ Slim, 187.

⁵⁴ Peregrinations = journeys.

⁵⁵ Lewin, 136

⁵⁶ Slim, 187.

⁵⁷ Slim, 188.

To improve their jungle skills all commanders were directed to concentrate on successful patrolling. The best soldiers were initially chosen for this task. As they became ever more successful in bringing back information and were successful in skirmishes with the Japanese, the stories of their successes spread throughout the army. One Gurkha patrol "... presented themselves before their general, proudly opened a large basket, lifted from it three gory Japanese heads, and laid them on his table. They then politely offered him for his dinner the freshly caught fish which filled the rest of the basket."⁵⁸ Patrols continued to go out with new men and experienced leaders until the army no longer thought of the Japanese as supermen. The jungle was no longer an enemy, but was neutral.⁵⁹

As the confidence of the individual soldier grew, Slim initiated actions at the unit and formation level. He ensured that they were well planned, ably led and in overwhelming strength, attacking Japanese companies with brigades. Slim knew that they could not at this stage risk even small failures.⁶⁰ By these series of actions Slim's army had attained the first of the "...intellectual foundations of morale; everyone knew [the army] could defeat the Japanese, [the army's] object *was* obtainable."⁶¹

Slim felt that these small successes helped the soldiers feel that Fourteenth Army was efficient. As well, he set about ensuring that rations improved, mail arrived on a

⁵⁸ Slim, 188.

⁵⁹ For a more detailed look at this aspect of jungle warfare, [The Jungle is Neutral](#), by Michael Calvert, is recommended.

⁶⁰ Slim, 189.

⁶¹ Slim, 189. Emphasis Slim's.

more regular basis, a welfare service was evident, and a theatre newspaper was published.⁶²

Rest and reinforcement camps had been identified as a major weakener of morale. These were reorganized, allocated to divisions: good officers and NCOs chosen to run them; training was improved and realistic; discipline was enforced and “... in a few months the Fourteenth Army reinforcement camps ... were clean, cheerful, active parts of the army.”⁶³

Unit and formation commanders were carefully selected. Slim resisted taking untried commanders.

[He] was often throughout the campaign pressed to take straight into appointments as brigadiers or battalion commanders, sometimes even as divisional commanders, officers from home or India without war experience in command. [He] always resisted this.^{64 65}

Discipline was improved throughout the army. In Slim’s words this “... was taken vigorously in hand by all commanders. We tried to make our discipline intelligent,

⁶² Slim, 189-190.

⁶³ Slim, 190-191.

⁶⁴ Slim, 191.

⁶⁵ Montgomery, in his publication High Command in War seems to agree with Slim’s approach when he states: “Probably one of the most important requirements of a commander is that he must be a good judge of men. He must be able to choose as his subordinates men of ability and character who will inspire others.” Montgomery, Bernard L. High Command in War. Germany, June 1945. (Reprinted in Canada in 1946), 11/24.

but we were an old-fashioned army and we insisted on its outward signs.”⁶⁶ With improved discipline and the growing confidence of the army in its ability to defeat the Japanese, “... the intellectual foundations of morale were laid.”⁶⁷

The foundation of material was slowly being improved. Transportation and rearward services were improving on a daily basis, though not to the standard of other theatres. Where there were shortages, this was “... frankly put to the men by their commanders at all levels and, whatever their race, they responded.”⁶⁸ Fourteenth Army developed a fierce pride in their ability to overcome adversity. Everyone in the army was treated equally, no one received preferential treatment, and there were no favourites or elites. Slim even put his headquarters staff on half rations when limited quantities required the forward formations to be on half rations.⁶⁹

These efforts were to prove fruitful. Slim found that:

In these and in many other ways we translated my rough notes on the foundations of morale, spiritual, intellectual, and material, into a fighting spirit for our men and a confidence in themselves and their leaders that was to impress our friends and surprise our enemies.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Slim, 193.

⁶⁷ Slim, 193.

⁶⁸ Slim, 194.

⁶⁹ Slim, 195.

⁷⁰ Slim, 196.

The weapon had been rebuilt and was now ready for the final test, the defeat of the Japanese in Burma.

Burma – The Victory – An Historical Overview⁷¹

From November 1943 to November 1944, the British situation in Burma gradually improved. It was not however, without its setbacks. The Allied plan called for two campaigns, the British, under Slim, advancing from the West while the Chinese, under Stilwell, advanced from the North. Both advances were initially successful, but were disrupted by Japanese counter attacks in February 1944 and a major Japanese offensive in March 1944.

While Stilwell continued to drive from the North, Slim was fighting a major action to blunt the Japanese offensive. Major battles raged around Imphal and Kohima as the Japanese tried to destroy the British and to advance on India. The confidence that Slim had instilled in his Army was now put to the test as units were surrounded and cut off from their normal supply. Slim re-supplied these units by air and they continued to fight. An airlift of the 5th Indian Division into Imphal and an attack from the British 2nd Infantry Division proved successful, and after much fierce fighting, the Japanese began to withdraw. By June 1944, this had become a general retreat. “Slim’s pursuing forces

⁷¹ Pimlott, John. The information for this part has been taken almost exclusively from this reference. 180, 204. The Allies had, by this time, substantially increased the forces in the Burma Theatre. Slim commanded an Army of two Corps, the Chinese had two Armies under Stilwell and there were special organizations such as the Chindits and Merrill’s Marauders, as well as air and naval support. The Japanese had approximately 115,000 troops facing the British. Slim, 378.

reached the Chindwin in November, poised for an advance into central Burma. The Japanese had suffered over 60,000 casualties.”⁷²

By early December, Slim’s forces had crossed the Chindwin and were advancing towards the next major obstacle, the Irrawaddy. Needing time to regroup, the Japanese planned to use the Irrawaddy as an obstacle to counter Slim’s advance. Initial British attempts to cross the Irrawaddy were not successful as the Japanese north of Mandalay were still in good condition. “In such circumstances a more elaborate plan was needed and Slim already had one prepared.”⁷³ His plan called for a diversion to draw the Japanese North while using other forces to move South to cut off the Japanese withdrawal routes.

Slim concocted an elaborate plan to deceive the Japanese. The Fourteenth Army’s XXXIII Corps – which had been fighting on the Dimapur-Kohima front and had since been heavily reinforced – would cross the river near Mandalay, openly and against opposition, in order to suggest to the Japanese that this was the main British attack. A dummy IV Corps headquarters, established to the north of XXXIII Corps, would send and receive fake messages, creating the illusion that the entire IV Corps was in the vicinity. In reality, the IV Corps would be moving south under radio silence; it would cross the Irrawaddy well below Mandalay,

⁷² Pimlott, 180.

⁷³ Pimlott, 204

building its own road through the jungle as it went, and attack the Japanese rear.

Slim's plan worked to perfection. Kimura [the Japanese commander] denuded his commands, including those fighting Sultan in the north, and massed them to oppose the British on the Irrawaddy north and west of Mandalay. In the meantime, Slim's IV Corps not only had crossed the river to the south, but had done so with such stealth that Japanese patrols believed the few British troops they ran up against were no more than a small diversionary force. By the time Kimura realized that he had the entire British IV Corps behind him, XXXIII Corps was starting to break out of the bridgeheads it had established across the Irrawaddy. The XXXIII Corps now came charging down on Mandalay from the north meeting only crumbling resistance on the way.⁷⁴

The operational ruse was successful and Mandalay fell to the British on 20 March 1945. Slim immediately commenced a pursuit of the withdrawing Japanese, hoping to reach Rangoon before the monsoons arrived. The monsoon started on 1 May 1945 with the British still short of Rangoon. Slim ordered a sea landing of 26th Indian Division and a parachute landing by 50th Indian Parachute Brigade to seize Rangoon. Encountering little Japanese resistance, the 26th Indian Division entered Rangoon with ease finally linking up with the other British forces on 5 May 1945.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Moser, Don. China-Burma-India. Alexandria, Virginia: World War II Time Life Books: 1978, 191-192.

⁷⁵ Pimlott, 204.

Although the Japanese had suffered a major defeat and had withdrawn behind the Sittang, The Battle for Burma was not quite done. The last pockets of resistance were flushed out by August 1945.⁷⁶ The atomic bombs dropped on the Japanese homeland ended all fighting in Burma.

Burma – The Victory – Operational Factors That Contributed to the Victory⁷⁷

Slim's and Fourteenth Army's successes were part of an overall Allied strategic plan for victory in Burma. In examining the operational reasons for success, we will also touch on some aspects outside of Fourteenth Army.

The operational reasons for success can be grouped as follows:

- Strategic direction;
- Preparation
- Sustainment; and
- Generalship.

Strategic Direction. The British and their Allies had learned from their disasters in Burma and elsewhere that an effective campaign could only be conducted if there was adequate guidance for the commanders on the ground. By this time in the war, the Allies had developed a strategy for defeating their enemies, and had put in place an effective command and control organization to implement this direction.

⁷⁶ It was to take until August 1945 for the last pockets of Japanese forces to be flushed out. By then, the British were actively preparing for operations to liberate Malaya and Singapore, although these were rendered unnecessary by the Japanese surrender. Pimlott, 204.

⁷⁷ Slim, 535–551. The operational factors that contributed to victory are found in this portion of Slim's book entitled "Afterthoughts".

In Burma, “[t]he first step towards ultimate victory ... was the setting up of a supreme command controlling all Allied forces, land, sea, and air, in the area.”⁷⁸ Mountbatten was made the Supreme Commander in South-East Asia⁷⁹ and he was able to meld the strengths and weaknesses of the British, Chinese, and Americans into an effective warfighting organization. Mountbatten was also able to overcome the clash of personalities that occurred amongst his strong willed commanders, especially Stilwell and Chiang Kai-shek.⁸⁰ Under his guidance and direction, Slim and the other commanders in Burma demonstrated proficiency in the operational art by taking his strategic direction and turning it into sound tactical operations to defeat the Japanese.

Preparation. Slim had gone to great lengths to ensure that his forces were better trained, better disciplined, and better led than were the Japanese. He had impressed upon his subordinates the importance of taking “... a balanced view of [the Japanese] as a formidable fighting man, who nevertheless had certain weaknesses, and of [themselves] as being able with training to beat [the Japanese] at his own, or any other game,....”⁸¹ Slim thought his divisions the best in the world. “They would go anywhere, do anything, go on doing it, and do it on very little.”⁸² As well, Slim and the Army had learned from

⁷⁸ Slim, 536.

⁷⁹ In August 1943, the British and United States Governments had formed a new South-East Asia Allied Command to control all forces in Burma, Ceylon, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, Siam and Indo-China. Admiral Mountbatten was appointed Supreme Commander, with, under him, three Commanders-in-Chief (C in C), for Sea, Land, and Air. General Sir George Giffard was to be the land C in C at 11th Army Group, and Slim as Commander of the newly formed Fourteenth Army was to serve under Giffard. Slim, 168

⁸⁰ Slim, 536.

⁸¹ Slim, 539.

⁸² Slim, 539.

the Japanese that it was not necessarily massive numbers of soldiers and equipment that counted, but training and morale.⁸³

Sustainment. The Army, under Slim's direction and Snelling's execution, dramatically changed the way it sustained itself, from an Army that relied heavily on road transport, at the expense of mobility, to one that could move anywhere and move quickly using limited wheeled transportation, pack animals, air transport and their own feet. "[They] discovered that, instead of the four hundred tons a day not considered excessive to keep a division fighting in more generous theatres, [they] could maintain [their] Indian divisions in action for long periods, without loss of battle efficiency or morale, on one hundred and twenty."⁸⁴ This massive reduction in sustainment requirements reduced the numbers of vehicles on the roads and tracks used by the army. It also improved the Army's ability to move quickly.

Slim had realized that to be successful operationally and tactically, he would have to ensure his operational sustainment. His recognition of this aspect was echoed by John English in his essay on "The Operational Art: Developments in the Theories of War", where he stated that "...it is indeed these dimensions as much as sweeping battlefield maneuvers that characterize the operational art...."⁸⁵ Slim's Army perfected the aerial resupply concepts and the procedures for support supplied by the air force. Whether it was normal resupply to forward air fields or an emergency resupply to an encircled force,

⁸³ Slim, 541

⁸⁴ Slim, 540.

⁸⁵ English, John. "The Operational Art: Developments in the Theories of War." In McKercher, B.J.C. and Hennessy, Michael, A., eds. The Operational Art: Developments in the Theories of War. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996. 19.

the techniques they discovered by trail and error would later pass into general use in the remainder of the British forces.

Generalship. The formations in Burma were required to fight over large distances often beyond support of one another. Slim had to have absolute confidence in his Generals and they in him. As Slim stated:

My corps and divisions were called upon to act with at least as much freedom as armies and corps in other theatres. Commanders at all levels had to act more on their own; they were given greater latitude to work out their own plans to achieve what they knew was the Army commander's intention. In time, they developed to a marked degree a flexibility of mind and a firmness of decision that enabled them to act swiftly to take advantage of sudden information or changing circumstances without reference from their superiors.⁸⁶

Slim felt that “[t]his acting without orders, in anticipation of orders, or without waiting for approval, yet always within the overall intention, must become second nature in any form of warfare where formations do not fight closely *en cadre*, and must go down to the smallest units.”⁸⁷ He chose “...competent, experienced commanders capable of making high-quality decisions in complex, volatile, ill-defined situations.”⁸⁸ He took

⁸⁶ Slim, 542.

⁸⁷ Slim, 542. Emphasis Slim's.

⁸⁸ Halpin, Stanley M. “The Human Dimensions of Battle command: A Behavioral Science Perspective on the Art of Battle Command”. Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army Research Institute (ARI) Battle Command Task force Report, 1995, 19, 46 as quoted in Reisweber, Major Deborah, US Army. “Battle Command: Will We Have It When We Need It?” Military Review. Vol LXXVII, No. 5. 49.

great effort to "...ensure the right people [were] in the right place at the right time to make critical decisions and lead their forces through the fog of war."⁸⁹

What the Fourteenth Army had accomplished in Burma was based on the Army's abilities. It was also based on Slim's personal abilities as General. Slim was considered a general of administrative genius, a brilliant defensive general, and an offensive commander in the same class as General Patton.⁹⁰ Slim was a soldier who today would be called a transformational leader.⁹¹ He had the ability to inspire his soldiers to excel in their performance. He was a role model. He was admired and respected by his subordinates, peers, and superiors. He motivated and challenged his subordinates and was instrumental in improving their morale. Slim told his soldiers what he expected from them and they in turn did it. They used their imagination and ingenuity to overcome hardships and deprivations. Slim knew that his Army was made up of many different nationalities and races. He accepted this and built his Army on the strengths of this diversity.⁹²

⁸⁹ Reisweber, 49.

⁹⁰ Anderson, 319.

⁹¹ Bass, Bernard M. Transformational Leadership: Industrial, Military, and Educational Impact. Mahwah, New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1998. 2 – 3. In this work, Bass describes two types of leadership, transactional and transformational. A transformational leader is one who does more with his colleagues and followers than set up simple exchanges or agreements. A transformational leader is: one whose leadership is charismatic such that the followers seek to identify with the leaders and emulate them; a leader that inspires the follower with challenge and persuasion providing a meaning and understanding; a leader that intellectually stimulates, expanding the follower's use of their abilities; and is a leader that is individually considerate, providing the follower with support, mentoring and coaching.

⁹² Bass, 2 – 6.

By way of illustration, in May of 1945, it looked like Slim was going to be sacked⁹³ by his superior, General Sir Oliver Leese.⁹⁴ “Over the next two weeks, as news spread throughout Fourteenth Army, a storm of protest erupted. Troops became mutinous, officers threatened to resign, and Leese, who backtracked in embarrassment, found himself dismissed instead.”⁹⁵

Conclusion

The success of the campaign in Burma was the result of a lot of hard work by all members of the Allied Forces, by good operational leadership, and good generalship. Slim had entered the theatre when all seemed lost. He had managed to conduct an effective withdrawal and save a large part of the British Forces. He was instrumental in re-building the Army and in commanding it successfully and defeating the Japanese. Slim’s success was based on his ability to recognize failure and then to implement measures to overcome the failure as well as his personal attributes as a transformational leader.

In August 1945, Slim was appointed Commander-in-Chief Allied Land Forces South East Asia. He was then appointed Commandant of the Imperial Defence College in 1946 and Chief of the Imperial General Staff in 1948 and subsequently promoted to

⁹³ Sacked = fired.

⁹⁴ In November 1944, Leese had taken over command from Giffard as land C. in C. at 11th Army Group and as such was Slim’s immediate superior. Anderson, 318 .

⁹⁵ Anderson, 320.

Field-Marshal. In May 1953, he was sworn in as Governor-General of Australia. He was made a member of the aristocracy in 1960 and died in 1970 at the age of 79.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Anderson, 322.

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