

Approach to Battle: Training the Indian Army During the Second World War, by Alan Jeffreys, Solihull: Helion &

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*Alok Deb**

From entering the portals of a military academy till retirement, an officer remains deeply involved with training. From the initial days as a subaltern to, later on, assuming the responsibilities of a commanding officer who has to ensure that his unit is battle ready, the involvement with training is total. Later, in senior ranks, he is expected to put his experience to work in devising more meaningful and effective ways to train the nation's military to be ready for the next war. It is, therefore, refreshing for a military reader to go through Alan Jeffreys' recently published work, *Approach to Battle: Training the Indian Army During the Second World War*, and understand just how the training standards of the pre-independence Indian Army—whose deployment stretched during that critical period from Singapore and the jungles of Malaya to the Western Desert and beyond to Europe—were constantly monitored, reviewed and improved, while the Indian Army deployed concurrently time and again for battle.

Jeffreys describes his work as 'a modern historical interpretation of the Indian Army as a holistic organisation during the Second World War... charting how the Indian Army developed a more comprehensive training structure than any other Commonwealth country.' The foreword, penned by Professor Emeritus Raymond Callahan of the University of Delaware, further states that works like this 'will illuminate, and in doing so, help

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the readers of its volumes to understand *an institution as important to imperial Britain, as the legions were to Rome*' (emphasis in original)—an apt simile for the Indian Army which, during World War II, was the largest volunteer army in the world with 2.5 million personnel under arms.

The book, laid out chronologically, commences with a short history of the Indian Army from inception till the outbreak of World War II. It highlights the contributions made during World War I, where 1,440,437 Indians wore uniform, though almost all officers were drawn from the British service, with some exceptions. The formation of the Army in India Committee of 1919–20, one of whose tasks was to envisage the military's role in the background of likely dominion status, finds mention. Consequent effects on training, doctrine and reorganisation have been dealt with in detail, especially the concept of regimental training centres, establishment of specialist schools of instruction, as also officers training schools (OTSs) and the Indian Military Academy (IMA). Most importantly, the manner in which certain Indian Army officers such as then Lieutenant Colonels (Lt Col) Thomas Corbett, Reginald Savory and Francis Taker, all household names later, consciously evolved a system of training based on current doctrine and managed to train the Indian Army for war through exercises, training instructions and conferences is well documented. While noting the professionalism of the Indian Army in such matters vis-à-vis its British counterpart, Jeffrey does comment that the former at the start of World War II was 'under equipped for their main role of the defence of India or to fight a modern army'. As an aside, he points to a malady which afflicts Indian Army officers even today: of getting 'immersed at regimental level with undue respect for their particular regiment, such as the cavalry regiments, the Garhwal Regiment, the Sikh Regiment and the Gurkha Regiments, in particular that has been named *Gurkhaitis*.'

Commencing from May 1940, in order to meet wartime requirements, the Indian Army expanded to twice its size in just 18 months. The methods adopted to overcome difficulties in training large numbers of recruits and officer cadets and the necessary expansion of the Military Training Directorate at Army Headquarters to 28 officers by January 1942 are well brought out. The author has highlighted the vast quantities of training material produced during the war: from Military Training Pamphlets (MTPs) (India) covering a series of topics like internal security instructions and frontier warfare (in 1943, 57 British and Indian

battalions and four armoured car regiments continued to be based on the North-West Frontier), Field Service Pocket Books (FSPBs) which included a wealth of administrative and tactical information about India (for example, on burial parties), to Army in India Training Memoranda (AITMs; which, according to Lieutenant General Francis Tucker, were produced at the rate of one AITM every month). The MTPs India were also produced for fighting in other theatres. Regimental centres were expanded and more training battalions raised. New OTSs at Belgaum, Bangalore and Mhow were established, while the IMA at Dehradun was expanded, as also the intake into military schools. Mention must also be made of one of the seminal decisions taken at this juncture, which pertains to designation of Southern Command, and later Central Command, as the area for conduct of training for operations and internal security duties.

An absorbing narration pertaining to the process of mechanisation and preparations for war in North Africa follows. Included are descriptions of some famous engagements of the North African campaign, such as the Battle of Sidi Barrani in December 1940, where 4th Indian Division earned its spurs, moving undetected over 100 miles of desert along with its divisional artillery of 72 guns and 48 Matilda tanks of 7th Royal Tank Regiment, before going into the attack and routing the enemy. Also included is a brief outline of the travails of the hastily trained 5th Indian Division which suffered a defeat on the Gazala Line and the gallant actions of 18 Indian Infantry Brigade, which despite being short of everything, managed to delay the German advance.

The author brings out the gradual evolution of the Indian Army's doctrine on mountain warfare commencing from the experiences of the North-West Frontier, and lessons learnt in the battlefields of North Africa and Italy. There is a brief description of the bitter fighting by the two Indian formations in the Battle of Keren in the East African campaign, after which the 4th Indian Division issued Training Instruction No. 28, Mountain Warfare, 16 January 1943 (including the sage advice that 'in mountainous countries, initial errors are not easy to rectify'). Fighting in Italy necessitated further training in mountain warfare and formalising of a doctrine, for which a Middle East Mountain Warfare Training Centre was established in Lebanon. The 4th Indian Division was recast as a Mountain Division in August 1943. Other formations, such as the 8th Indian Division, issued training instructions based on their experiences (in this case, Training Instruction No. 1 dated 27 March 1943). Some

of the important battles of the Italian campaign are briefly described and the lessons enumerated.

The campaigns in Malaya and Burma necessitated a fresh look at training in jungle environs. The author illustrates just how unprepared the Indian Army was in terms of numbers, weapons, equipment and training, when the Japanese offensive commenced. As regards trained junior leadership, in one brigade there were only three regular officers per battalion while the rest were newly arrived emergency commissioned officers. Despite some efforts at innovation, defeat in the Malayan campaign seemed foretold: finally, 130,000 Commonwealth troops were taken prisoner. Utilising some of the evacuees from Malaya to form training teams to drive home important lessons resulted in the rejuvenation of training to an extent. The author concludes that the sudden expansion of the army and continuous shedding of trained manpower for new raisings contributed in no small measure to this debacle.

The brief on the Burma campaign commences with the famous Retreat from Burma in 1942 and the First Arakan Campaign and lessons learnt from both, which resulted in the enunciation of a clear jungle warfare doctrine that was disseminated across the army. Jeffreys explains how at the start of the campaign in early 1941, hardly any officers of the hastily constituted Burma Division had any knowledge of jungle warfare, except some experience of shikar! Despite induction of 17th Indian Division and 7th Armoured Brigade, not much headway was made and it was accepted that 'in the jungle the Japs had complete moral ascendancy'. The blowing up of the Sittang Bridge prematurely in January 1942 and its tragic consequences, resulting in the longest retreat in British military history, are explained, as also the heroism of rearguard actions to delay the enemy advance. A quick encapsulation of the lessons and production of 45,000 copies of MTP No. 9, Jungle Warfare followed in August 1942, to prevent jungle warfare, as a wag put it, from degenerating into 'Bungle Warfare'. Despite this, the First Arakan Campaign did not produce expected results when faced with the superior defensive tactics of the Japanese. Postmortems of the failure listed reasons ranging from lack of time for training to poor regimental cohesion, poor tactics of attacking fixed defences head-on on a narrow front, as also the low standard and morale of reinforcements. With the appointment of Field Marshal Slim and other changes in higher leadership, listing out of newer lessons gleaned from allied armies in AITM No. 21 and their implementation, a fresh beginning was made. This included designation

of two divisions as Training Divisions, whose sole job was to train the formations and units for jungle warfare, and setting up of jungle warfare schools. All this resulted in a rejuvenated 14th Army breaking the back of the Japanese in the Second Arakan Campaign in 1944. Jeffreys has included vivid descriptions of the battles of Ukhrul, Sangshak, Kohima and Imphal, where close air support and interdiction by the Royal Air Force (RAF) and United States Army Air Force (USAAF) were pivotal.

Towards the end of World War II, almost all the fighting in Burma was being done by Indian and Commonwealth armies. Jeffreys brings out the training carried out for airmobile and amphibious warfare, and notes that 19th Infantry Division, under Major General 'Pete' Rees, was the best trained formation of the army at that time, with a standardised organisation which helped it achieve its objectives with distinction—whether fighting in jungles or crossing the Irrawady and then taking Mandalay. He notes that 'every officer in the Division had to write up a paper each month on three subjects which were a narrative of any action the officer had been involved in'—something that the present-day Indian Army attempts to follow. The author details the problems associated with the new Directorate of Combined Operations (despite 38 pamphlets issued by it) due to unclear lines of operation, with South East Asia Command (SEAC), Southern Army and General Headquarters (GHQ) India all looking for stakes in this turf. By 1945, there were '920 training pamphlets listed by GHQ India, although those listed included both those produced by GHQ India and War Office manuals reprinted in India.' Despite this there was reluctance to modify course syllabi, as can be seen from Staff College Quetta which, till as late as October 1944, did not treat jungle warfare as a separate subject! A mention is also made of the service rendered by the Army Education Corps and the Wilcox Committee of November 1944 to look at India's defence requirements after the war, with Brigadier (later General) Cariappa as member.

To conclude, one must unreservedly accept that through painstaking research Alan Jeffreys has brought to the forefront a subject that is fading away from the mind of today's Indian Army. The wealth of detail that he has managed to marshal from archives in the United Kingdom, memoirs of officers from the British, Indian and Pakistani armies and contemporary writing add greatly to its attraction for the military reader. This includes a number of interesting nuggets of information, which would stand a military professional in good stead by adding to his perspective of just how a military machine as large as the Indian Army is

made ready for battle. One hopes that at least some, if not the majority, of sources listed in the footnotes are available to researchers in India. That notwithstanding, this book would serve to educate those interested in the subject and be a useful addition to any military library.