

Winning a Battle Honour: 1 Sikh LI in Pyawbwe, 1945

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Abstract

Pyawbwe was captured in a three-brigade envelopment by 17 Indian Division. It was stoutly defended and after its capture some 1,110 Japanese dead and 13 guns were counted. The official history describes the fight as 'the only large action in the Battle of the Rangoon Road' and says that it 'finally shattered [the Japanese] 33rd Army'. The Imperial War Museum, London is digitising their collection of World War II newsreels. Among those is one of 1 Sikh LI in action at Pyawbwe in Burma, on 11 April 1945, filmed by an Indian Public Relations cameraman, Lieutenant H Benjamin. A copy of the video, with the dope-sheet, is now with the USI. The video is muted so it does not have any background sounds or narrative, but it does give an insight to the Pyawbwe operations. This account covers the story of 1 Sikh Light Infantry (1 Sikh LI) and their earning the battle honour of Pyawbwe, in addition to other honours. The article aims to provide context to the battle.

Preparations in India

After its raising at Jullundur on 01 October 1941, 1 Sikh LI

moved to the Jungle Training School at Raiwala, near Dehradun, in March 1944 to prepare for a move to the Arakan in Burma for operations. These orders were changed in late April and the Battalion moved to Ranchi in May 1944, where it joined 99 Infantry Brigade, in readiness to join 17 Indian Division who were then fighting at Imphal. The Battalion was moved to several different camps in the Ranchi area, including Lohardaga, Dipatoli

and Namkun, during this period, living in tents or makeshift bashas. The monsoon made this very trying.

In late September 1944, Lieutenant Colonel W H Barlow-Wheeler assumed command of the Battalion. Training started with 255 Indian Tank Brigade consisting of 5 (Probyn's) Horse and 9 Royal Deccan Horse, both with Sherman tanks and 16 Light Cavalry with armoured cars. This involved a lot of live ammunition firing with the tank regiments, the troops going in against simulated bunkers as close as ten yards; the tanks would switch from 75mm High Explosive (HE) shells to solid anti-tank shot for the last few yards. This was wonderful training and the liaison with tank commanders was excellent.

Changes in organisation were made to suit the projected role of the Battalion. A carrier platoon was formed and equipped; and then disbanded. The 3" mortar platoon had mule transport. The Animal Transport Platoon (mules) was sent on ahead of the Battalion, when the Division moved from Ranchi, so that it could be held in the Imphal area, with the rear Divisional echelons, to join the Battalion at Meiktila later. In fact, it was not until 1 Sikh LI had got to the Shan States in June 1945 that the animal transport platoon actually re-joined the battalion.

99 Brigade was ordered to move to the Imphal area, in January 1945, for unspecified action as part of 17 Division. All Divisional signs were removed and preparations for the move were completed very quickly. The Battalion moved from Ranchi to the Imphal Plain (Wangjing) in January 1945 after a somewhat eventful trip. It set off by train to Dimapur, the railhead for Imphal. It crossed the Brahmaputra River at Gauhati by ferry and reloaded on a metre-gauge railway line for the run to Dimapur. At Wangjing, in February 1945, 99 Brigade prepared for its next task — an air-transported move to Meiktila. For reasons of security, 1 Sikh LI was not told the Divisional task of attacking Meiktila while 99 Brigade remained in the Imphal area until the capture of the Thabukton airfield, 12 miles from Meiktila. 99 Brigade was then to fly in with no transport other than two jeeps and trailers for a whole battalion which would then rely on local bullock carts and any motor transport that 17 Division could make available. The Brigade had 21 Mountain Regiment (3.7" guns with jeep transport) in support.

Intensive training for the air move began and jungle training was forgotten as the fighting was to be in the open paddy fields of Central Burma. Time was short but spirits high. 21 Mountain Regiment impressed on the importance of infantry getting as close as possible to the fall of the rounds from the supporting guns. During the training, the battalion got to within fifty yards of the fall of shot. It suffered one casualty but learned a lesson and gained confidence which stood them in very good stead later.

The Offensive into Central Burma

The offensive opened on 03 December 1944, when XXXIII Corps crossed the Chindwin River at Kalewa and Mowlaik, and IV Corps at Sittaung. By 15 February 1945, 7 Indian Division of IV Corps had seized a bridgehead over the Irrawaddy in the Pagan-Nyaungu area near the roads leading to Meiktila. Over the next few days, 17 Indian Division (less 99 Brigade and 21 Mountain Regiment), with 255 Indian Tank Brigade under its command, crossed the Irrawaddy River and assembled in this bridgehead. The intention was that 17 Indian Division, strongly supported by close tactical-support aircraft, move rapidly to capture Meiktila and hold that town against all counter-attacks. En-route to Meiktila, 17 Division had to capture Thabutkon airstrip to allow for the immediate fly-in of 99 Brigade group.

The battle for Meiktila began by attacking from four directions and by nightfall on 28 February the town was surrounded. The Japanese resisted tenaciously, but were worn down by coordinated assaults by air, tanks and infantry. After fierce fighting, the town eventually fell on 03 March.

Flying to Thabutkon

99 Brigade Group began flying into Thabutkon airstrip on 28 February. The Brigade consisted of 6/9 Jat Regt (Div Recce Regt), 6/15 Punjab, 1 Sikh LI, 1/3 Gurkha Rifles, a company of 9/13 Frontier Force Rifles (MMGs), 88 Anti-tank Battery, 21 Mountain Regiment, Tehri Garhwal Field Company (Engineers) and other units. Conditions on the airfield were hectic; it took a total of 353 sorties to land the brigade, totalling some 4,350 men plus weapons and stores. Luckily there was very little opposition. 1 Sikh LI flew out from Palel, on 28 February, in American Air Force transport

aircraft — a mixture of C-47s (Dakota) and C-46s (Commandos). For most of the men it was their first flight in an aircraft and many suffered of air sickness, not helped on at least one aircraft where the friendly American crew made coffee on a primus stove in the cockpit and offered it around — without many takers.

The flight from Palel to Thabutkon, about 200 miles, took two hours. The air strip was a mass of dust as plane after plane landed at a few seconds' interval, pulled to the side for five minutes to unload and then took-off back for the next load. To top-off all the hectic activity, there was a very large air-drop of petrol, ammunition and rations going on, a few hundred yards north of the airstrip, for the remainder of the Division. There was, in fact, so much activity in the neighbourhood that the roar of battle at Meiktila, a few miles further east, did not make much impression and everyone got on with deploying and digging-in on the perimeter of the strip. The soil was good for digging trenches and the temperature pleasantly warm after a very hot day. Once landed, the infantry moved to positions in and around Meiktila.

After the capture and clearance of Meiktila, 17 Indian Division was organised to meet the inevitable Japanese counter-attack. 99 Brigade established a series of mutually supporting *harbours* and *keeps*. 1 Sikh LI provided the garrisons for A, B and C keeps, 6/15 Punjab for D keep, 6/7 Rajput (under command of 99 Brigade) for E keep and 1/3 GR for F keep. This enabled the two motorised brigades to be available for more fluid operations with 255 Tank Brigade. On 15 March, 9 Brigade of 5 Indian Division was flown in. This provoked the final desperate Japanese attempt to retake the town but the siege of Meiktila was over. The battle of Meiktila from February to April 1945 does not form part of this account though 1 Sikh LI did earn the Battle Honour for '*Defence of Meiktila*'.

Pursuit on the Rangoon Road

17 Indian Division and 255 Tank Brigade began the IV Corps advance, on 06 April, striking from all sides at the remnants of the Japanese 33rd Army, under Lieutenant General Honda, at Pyawbwe, while a flanking column of tanks and mechanised infantry cut the main road behind them and attacked their rear. This was the last determined stand by the Japanese before the race to

reach Rangoon ahead of the monsoon. Pyawbwe lay 25 miles south of Meiktila. It was the most decisive battle in Central Burma where 33rd Army was shattered completely. The task of 1 Sikh LI in the battle was to take the high ground at Hminlodaung, South-East of Pyawbwe, which came to be known as 'Pagoda Hill' as there was a pagoda on this ridge about 700 feet above the plain ground.

Late in the night on 03 April 1945, 1 Sikh LI received orders for the advance on Pyawbwe. Its role for the first day was to push on ahead and seize the villages of Kweinge and Kokkogaing, some six miles south of Pyintha. This was done without opposition, except for a small action at Kweinge. The Battalion moved into harbour in Kweinge and spent a quiet night. A sad note was the death of Lieutenant Jones who was bringing canteen stores and had borrowed a jeep and set out despite warnings that the roads were mined. He died when his jeep was blown up.

The Attack

When 1 Sikh LI launched its attack, it had only three rifle companies, one rifle company having been wiped out at Meiktila. The plan was that A Company, under Captain DW Blois, was to take the first portion of the ridge followed by C Company taking the area of the Pagoda. The objective itself was tricky as there was a hump where the Pagoda was. The approach was difficult and the surrounding area broken, which hampered armour deployment. There was artillery in support, no doubt, but any movement on the approach was under enemy observation.

During the Battalion move, it was found that the village of Kokkobauk some 800 yards to the right was the target for the Divisional artillery followed by a tremendous volume of tank supporting fire. It was clear that the enemy resistance was strong. 'Overs' began to whistle overhead in ever-increasing numbers, and then just as the forward company began to dig in, our tanks mistook them for the enemy and it came under fairly heavy machine gun fire plus the odd 75mm shell. Luckily, it was rapidly getting dark and no damage was caused. The main concern, however, was a sudden cloud-burst soon after dark; the Battalion was without any protection from the rain of any sort (it had not seen

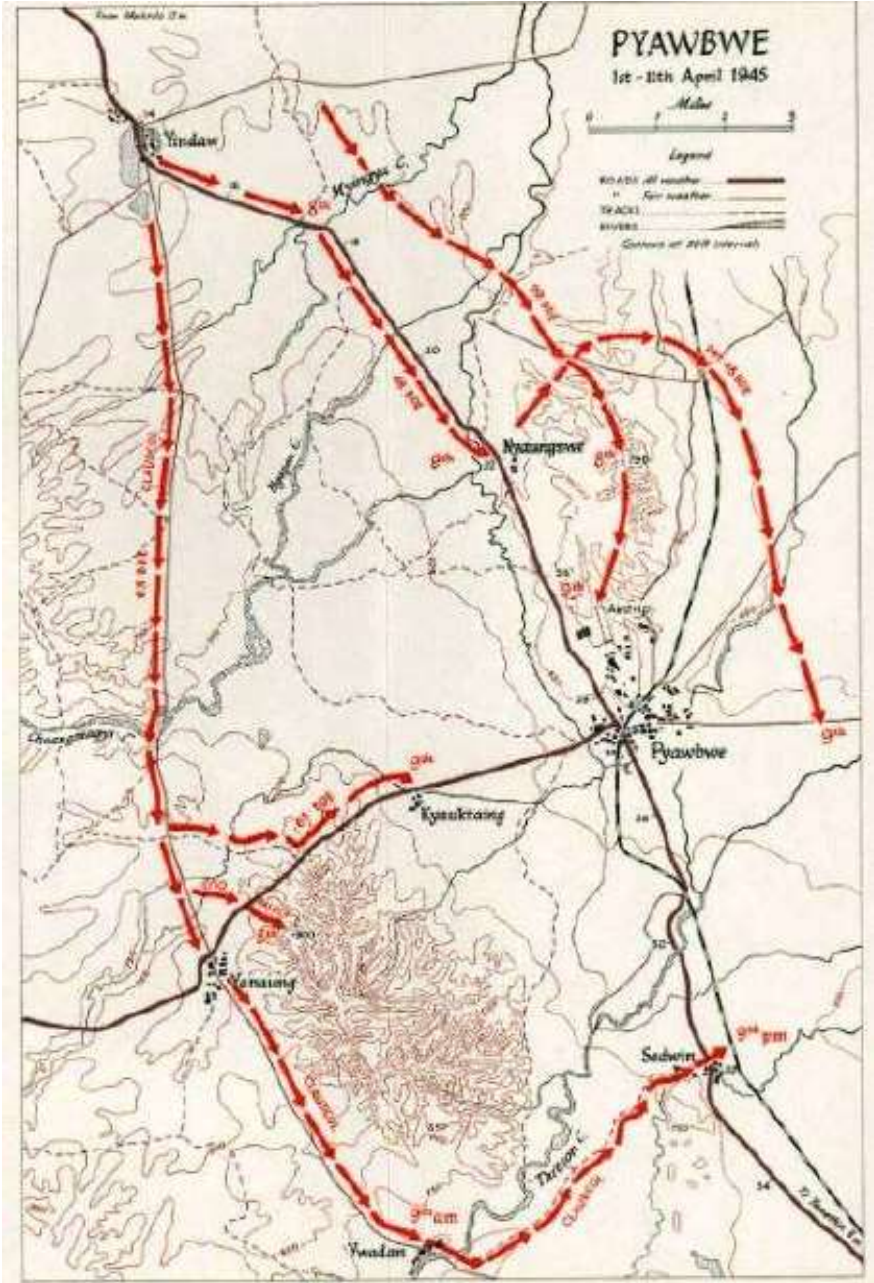
ground-sheets, mosquito nets or blankets for three weeks) and the trenches were filled to the brim within half an hour. It was a cold and sleepless night for all.

On 09 April, A Company advanced with great determination against heavy enemy fire and continuous shelling. The Japanese gunners scored a direct hit and Lieutenant WPJ Cooper, the Intelligence Officer, died. Captain Blois too was hit by enemy machine gun fire and paid for his dash and courage with supreme sacrifice. Subedar Major Bachan Singh, MC took over command of A Company after Captain Blois was killed. The first objective was captured but the leading section, under Havildar Bishen Singh, was wiped out. In spite of all efforts, no further progress could be made to capture the second hump on which was the prized 'Pagoda'.

The Japanese counter-attacked to regain the position but their efforts were repulsed. Next day, under the second-in-command Major JD Maling DSO, MC, the Battalion attacked and captured the 'Pagoda Hill' on which the enemy had been heavily lodged. The attack was successful and the enemy, leaving its dead, ran away. About 200 enemy dead were counted in the area. A lot of enemy arms and equipment was captured. 1 Sikh LI casualties in the attack were also very heavy.

Aftermath

The Battalion then took part in 17 Division's mechanised dash towards Rangoon in response to the brief Corps order, *'Tally-ho! On to Rangoon!'* Japanese resistance was crumbling but the monsoon was breaking. Every form of motor transportation was pressed into service, and 1 Sikh LI was frequently moved on tank transporters when the tanks themselves were fighting ahead. Air supply was also hampered by the weather. For several weeks the Battalion was on half rations so that the supply, all by air, could be maintained for petrol and ammunition.



Map 1: Pyawbwe

The Roll of Honour for the war was a lengthy one. Of the 16 officers, five were killed and six wounded, with one evacuated sick. Six Viceroy's Commissioned Officers (VCOs) were killed, together with 86 Other Ranks (ORs), and a large number were wounded. A very heavy toll indicative of the heavy fighting the Battalion was involved in. 1 Sikh LI earned two Distinguished Service Order (DSO) (Lieutenant Colonel WH Barlow-Wheeler and Major JD Maling, MC); one Indian Order of Merit (IOM) (Subedar Basant Singh); one Bar to Military Cross (MC) (Major DJ Ewert); four MCs (Captain Ata Mohammed, Captain DJ Ewert, Subedar Major Bachan Singh, Subedar Mohinder Singh); three Indian Distinguished Service Medal (IDSM) (Subedar Major Jiwan Singh, Havildar Char Singh and Sepoy Ginder Singh); seven Military Medals (MMs);, seven Mention-in-Despatches and four Certificates of Gallantry during their time in Burma. In addition, it earned the battle honours of '*Defence of Meiktila*'; '*Rangoon Road*'; '*Pyawbwe*'; and '*Sittang 1945*'. It was also awarded the theatre honour of '*Burma 1942-45*'. All this in a period of five months!

Colonel CH Price was then in Bareilly as Training Battalion Commandant and was anxiously awaiting news of how the battalion he had raised was faring in Burma. He knew heavy casualties had been suffered. It was a proud moment for him when he received a personal letter from the Commander-in-Chief, India which read:

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DO No. 83/M-4/11

From
Commander-in-Chief in India
New Delhi

11 April 1945

My dear Price,

I have been more than delighted to hear very good accounts of your 1st Battalion from Gen Messervy.

He writes,

'I thought you would like to know how wonderfully well the 1st Sikh LI have done in battle. The Div Commander is delighted with them; he says he has never seen better infantry — they have shown tremendous dash and enthusiasm and their spirit is magnificent. Yesterday they killed 264 Japs in a series of difficult village actions. They are rather low in numbers now, both in officers and men. I hope they will be able to be kept up to strength, to carry on the good work they are doing.'

Yours sincerely

Sd/-

C J E Auchinleck

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