

"DOUBLE HANDLE"

by

the Reverend Major A F L Colson MBE MA Royal Engineers (Retired)

THE PLANNED ASSAULT ON ELIZABETH ISLAND COMBERMERE BAY BURMA
BY 3 COMMANDO BRIGADE

A personal account of an unsuccessful operation carried out by COPP 8 in
October 1944

Dedicated with fond love to

Petto

(Alice Ruth Mackay Sim)

who

by God's grace -

I met on 2nd February 1951 in Leora Blue Mountains NSW and married on 18th
May 1951 in St John's Church Wahroonga Sydney NSW

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With very warm appreciation and thanks to

John Martin LLB (London) LL M (Michigan) Solicitor Blackwater Farm House
Great Witchingham Norfolk

by whose kindness encouragement skill and generosity this version of "Double
Handle" has been produced.

Remembering also ML 162 lying and decaying at Reedham Norfolk whose
condition inspired John Martin to write to the Eastern Daily Press in Nelson's
Trafalgar Bicentenary Year 2005 expressing his concern. In response to the EDP
article Alec Colson made contact with John Martin.

"DOUBLE HANDLE"

*"When anything happens to our displeasure, let us endeavour to take off its trouble
by turning it into spiritual or artificial advantage, and handle it on that side in
which it may be useful to the designs of reason; for there is nothing but hath a
double handle, or at least we have two hands to apprehend it. "*

**Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667) Bishop of Down and Connor, pastor and
teacher**

We must have looked an odd group of men to the sailors of HMAS Nizam who
were lining the rail of their ship and staring down at us. The destroyer was lying
hove-to about a mile outside Kayts, a small port on the north coast of Ceylon, and
our motor launch had just come alongside her. As the Australian sailors peered
curiously down, we looked up and wondered how we were going to get five tons

of stores and eight canoes on board the destroyer. The strength of our unit was only eleven, some of whom belonged to the navy and some to the army. Our dress was more varied and colourful than our origin. Freddie Ponsonby, the commander of the unit and a Dartmouth-trained lieutenant of the Royal Navy, wore a khaki cover on his naval cap to match his khaki shirt and shorts. Geoff Richards, an RNVR lieutenant, insisted on wearing his shabby bush hat on his head, his fighting knife and pistol at his waist and his monkey on his shoulder. In combination with his bushy beard, which had been the curiosity of the Metropolitan Police Force in the years before the war, these peculiarities of dress made him the cynosure for the watching sailors. The other naval officers and ratings were dressed in various fashions between the extremes of Freddie's near conservatism and Geoff's exhibitionism. On the military side, my sergeant and corporal joined me in presenting a uniform dress of khaki drill and green berets. In addition to the strange appearance of the members of the unit, our eight canoes were lying on the deck of the ML and displaying their charms and camouflaged canvas to the hungry eyes of the spectators above.

I often wondered afterwards what they thought of us. An assortment of soldiers and sailors, a half-and-half mixture of officers and men, must have seemed strange ingredients for a fighting unit. Probably the name of the unit, Naval Party 740, was generally known amongst the crew of the Australian ship, and perhaps they knew too that the destination of their ship was Chittagong. It must have seemed extraordinary to them that HMAS Nizam, an 1800 ton destroyer of the Eastern Fleet, should be sent a thousand miles across the Bay of Bengal for the sole purpose of delivering eleven men and their equipment to the theatre of operations. What rich material for the cook to weave into stories during his idle moments in the ship's galley; what fertile soil for planting "genuine" tales of the captain's steward. If our security was as good as it should have been, such fabrications could have been based only on common-sense deductions and guesswork, for Naval Party 740 was a pseudonym and everything about the unit was Top Secret.

The Nizam 's first lieutenant had detailed a loading party to help us embark our stores. The duty men were soon joined by many volunteers from the rest of the crew and the task of shifting five tons of stores from the ML onto the destroyer, which had at first sight seemed so formidable, was completed in a few minutes. When we set foot on the Nizam 's deck, we found ourselves the centre of attraction for what looked like the ship's entire crew. A film star, alighting outside a cinema to attend a film premiere, could not have felt more conspicuous. The clicking cameras operated by the enthusiastic reception committee sounded the overture to a three-day voyage of Australian kindness and hospitality. Commander Brookes, the Nizam 's captain, gave us the use of his cabin as he said he was accustomed to sleeping near the bridge when the ship was at sea. In the wardroom, the shyest member of the party found his tongue loosened by the strong Australian beer and freed by the warmth of the Australian welcome. The only unpleasant part of the voyage came during the last night when a cyclone struck the ship. Just before lunch the next day we sighted the coast near Chittagong.

At the mouth of the Karnapuli River a Fairmile B Motor Launch of the Royal Indian Navy was stopped and waiting. From the deck of the destroyer, the ML

looked like a small cabin cruiser more suitable for a holiday on the Norfolk Broads than for meeting a fleet destroyer in the open sea. In the box-like bridge of the ML were two officers dressed in white shirts and shorts, and one of these, presumably the captain of the small craft, shouted through a megaphone at the Nizam's bridge. Commander Brookes' reply, amplified by the electric loudhailer, overwhelmed the pretentiously large voice of the megaphone. The two voices, floating over the muddy water, might have belonged to the ships themselves, the one booming, loud and rather imperious, and the other small, faint and humble. "You go ahead", boomed the loudhailer. "We'll follow you". The ML veered towards the river, and the destroyer, gathering way, swung slowly into the wake of the small craft.

The port at Chittagong lies eleven miles up river, and in October 1944 it was very busy supplying most of the needs of the Arakan front. The northern bank of the river is protected from the scouring action of the swift current by a stone wall, and now the destroyer's wash was lapping the topmost stones like a rushing Severn bore. Stirred by the unusual sight of a large warship, groups of natives standing on the banks waved a greeting. Not since the Japanese overran Burma in 1942 had a destroyer been seen at Chittagong, and we felt proud to be on board the Nizam as she steamed upstream in pursuit of the ML.

Suddenly, on rounding a bend in the river, the water ahead was crowded with anchored vessels; there were freighters, junks, sampans, and the myriad small boats that are part of an Eastern port. The navy was already represented by the groups of MLs moored gunwale to gunwale like detachments of soldiers on parade; they belonged to the South African, Indian and Burmese flotillas of the Arakan Coastal Forces and the party had learnt to respect them in the operations of the previous year. The Nizam stemmed the swiftly flowing ebb tide and her anchor dropped into the chocolate water on its way to join the many others already biting into the soft mud of the river bed. With his ship anchored within the close boundaries of the river banks, and knowing that the enemy aerodromes were less than two hundred miles away, Commander Brookes felt as nervous as a claustrophobe in a lift stuck between floors.

A rusty, dirty landing craft came alongside, farewells were said and our blunt-nosed craft headed for the shore. Before we were half way there, the Nizam had weighed anchor and started the difficult turn in the crowded anchorage. The current was flowing at six knots, and as the bows swung down river towards the sea it seemed they must strike a nearby vessel. Then the eye, following the graceful length of the destroyer's silhouette, saw the stem swinging perilously close to another stationary vessel. The landing craft had not reached the wharveside before the Nizam was moving with the tide towards the Bay of Bengal. It was a masterly display of seamanship. A few sailors on deck waved a farewell and as we raised our hands in reply we felt we were saying goodbye to old friends.

The landing craft bumped against the timbers of the wharf and the jarring sensation was a fitting prelude to the reception that awaited us. Apparently, we were not expected, an unpleasant change from the comforts of the Nizam. Freddie went off at once to voice his displeasure, find us a home and some transport to carry us to it. Meanwhile, the stores had to be unloaded, packed into a naval shed and locked up for the night.

That evening we moved into 4 7 Rest Camp in the middle of Chittagong. Mike Peacock, a lieutenant RNVR, shared a room with me but a verandah which connected it with the other rooms removed the effect of the dividing walls. While we unpacked and dressed for dinner, a general conversation went on among the five of us.

"What a hell of a place to put us into", said Freddie, his voice sounding muffled as he groped at the bottom of his box for a clean bush shirt.

"Oh I don't know, it might not be so bad", murmured Geoff as he leaned on the verandah rail and addressed an imaginary crowd on the road below. He had finished dressing, his bush shirt was clean and his water-plastered hair contrasted strangely with his dry, wiry beard. He was sipping a whisky while he stared idly into the night. Geoff was a mixture of the gregarious party lover and the anchorite. He would have been equally happy at the Chelsea Arts Ball or alone in the jungle.

"All you want is a bottle of whisky", said Freddie as he walked onto the verandah and poured himself a drink. "But seriously", he continued, "it could not be worse and in addition there are no facilities for training". "Have a whisky, Gerry?" Geoff called.

Gerry Kuyper was the South African sub-lieutenant who helped Geoff with the work of maintaining the party. His parents were Boers who had no love for the British, and as they had spent two years in Ceylon as civilian internees during the South African War, their attitude was understandable.

"I maintain that whoever was responsible for putting us in here deserves to have his bottom smacked", Freddie averred.

There was a twinkle in Geoff's eye as he said "I rather agree, but I think that it might be quite fun making the best of their mistakes".

Freddie put his head into our room. "Come on, young shavers. All the old men were dressed long ago".

Mike and I were often bracketed together by the term "young shavers" because our ages, twenty-two and twenty three respectively, seemed so young by comparison to the over thirties of Gerry and Geoff and Freddie's twenty-eight years. No one likes to be called young except those to whom the term is a compliment by reason of its inaccuracy. Mike muttered under his breath.

Sitting on our boxes and amongst the mosquitoes, we drank by the light that shone through our bedroom doors. The frogs croaked in the wet grass across the road, the shunting trains puffed and clanged in the marshalling yards beyond the fields, and from the camp below came the continuous singsong chatter of the Indian soldiers. Mike went out onto the verandah and I heard him say, "If we are going to keep any secrets, the sooner we get out of here the better". Mike was the security officer of the party so his interest in the subject was natural, but the rest of us were almost equally keen. The need for secrecy had been instilled into us during our training, and no member of the party required to be reminded of the great trust reposed in him.

Naval Party 740 was a covering title for COPP 8 which in turn stood for Combined Operations Pilotage and Reconnaissance Party No 8. An initial was not used to represent "reconnaissance" because it had been thought likely that a shrewd guess would light on the correct and compromising word for which it stood. COPP 8 was one of about a dozen units raised during the war to provide

information, both naval and military, about the beaches selected for an assault. Other parties had successfully reconnoitred the beaches chosen for the landings in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, Southern France and Normandy and now COPP 8 was engaged in similar operations in South East Asia. As we had to visit the parts of the enemy coast upon which descents were contemplated, we became familiar with the plans for assault operations. Our responsibilities were heavy. On the one hand, the intelligence we gained of the enemy beaches and defences could save lives and material and on the other a word spoken thoughtlessly over a drink or a reconnaissance recklessly carried out might forewarn the enemy and result in the destruction of the assault force.

Now we had been quartered in a transit camp, and would have to live in a common mess with all kinds of military personnel who used the camp as a staging post on their journeys to and from the forward areas. We had had similar homes before, and the story was always the same. At first the unusual combination of naval caps and green berets attracted attention and then, on better acquaintance, would come the unwelcome questions.

When we arrived in India in September 1943, we were sent to Cocanada a small port on the east coast about four hundred miles north of Madras. It had been especially selected as our base because, apart from another party similar to our own, there were no other servicemen in the district. The white population of the town was small, consisting of the port officer, police superintendent, bank manager and so forth. Having watched us paddling our canoes and swimming in our strange suits, their curiosity was aroused and the inevitable flow of questions began. It seemed better to tell them something rather than to say bluntly "What we do is none of your business."

A suitable tale was invented and told to our friends as occasions offered. The tale was that we were connected with the fisheries control, our job being to catch fish and place rings on their tails so that on re-capture it would be possible to plot their movements. This went down quite well, or at least we thought it did. Then one day a sweet-factory manager's wife cornered Geoff in the club. "Why are fish so scarce in the market?" she demanded angrily, obviously in no mood to accept feeble excuses. Geoff was taken aback and admitted that we were not concerned with fish at all. "Our job is secret", he told her in a confidential whisper, "something to do with counterespionage, but I am afraid I can't tell you more than that".

Thus was born our second story. It was much more specious than the first and everybody's curiosity was satisfied. Everything went very well until Christmas day. Our party was away on an operation, but our sister party celebrated Christmas in a traditional British fashion and by evening much of the spirit ration had gone. Suddenly the telephone rang. It was the police superintendent and he was upset. "Some Sikhs have been landed from a Japanese submarine at a small village further up the coast. What are you doing about it?" he asked sarcastically. It was a thick voice which told the policeman that we had nothing to do with counter-espionage after all. Soon afterwards two of the officers were decorated and so no further attempt was made at story telling. From that time we maintained a stony silence and allowed the imaginations of our civilian friends to supply the meaning of our nocturnal activities.

Freddie got up from his box to pour whisky into any glass that was held out to receive it. Geoff's was always ready and Gerry's was not many seconds behind. Mike and I were rather abstemious. Mike was thrifty for a reason. He was saving for a university course in veterinary science and felt that filling his inside with unnecessary quantities of whisky was a waste of money; for my part, I did not like the taste very much and in any case only small quantities would stay down in my stomach. Freddie sipped his whisky happily.

"I'll have to see what I can do to get us out of here" he said, "but don't let's worry now. Drink up and we'll go down and sample this transit camp food".

The next morning, Freddie walked up to the Naval HQ to see the Naval Officer in Charge, or NOIC, and the rest of us went down to our store in the naval compound on the riverbank. Geoff had managed to borrow a 15-cwt truck by using his well developed powers of persuasion, so we were saved the dreary walk through the dusty and dirty streets of the town. Once in the shed, there was endless work to be done in preparation for the coming operations.

Torches, compasses, Sten guns, pistols and gear of all kinds had to be cleaned and checked, and many of the articles had to be waterproofed. From Ceylon we had brought one canoe of a new type. Instead of the canvas envelope stretched over a skeleton frame of light wooden spars, this new canoe was made entirely of balsa wood and was composed of three rigid sections which bolted together. It had been constructed by the same firm that was making Mosquito bombers, and was a beautiful craft which it was rumoured had cost the Government £120. Although we had plenty of experience with the new canoe in the peaceful waters of Ceylon, we had never yet used it in action.

The stowage of all the gear we were accustomed to carry in the canvas canoes had to be worked out for the wooden one. Then stout rubber thongs and canvas bags had to be attached to the inside of the hull to hold the various items of equipment in position. The trusted and tried canvas canoes lay side by side on the floor of the shed. On the bows of each was the name selected by the officer who "owned" it. I remember the christening ceremonies which took place at Cocanada. Mike had had no doubt in his mind about what he was going to call his boat. "Putnoe" was to be the name to remind him of the street in Bedford where he lived. After the name was painted on the bows in black lettering, I found my sergeant arguing with Leading Seaman Neil about the correct pronunciation of the strange word, but as both men came from the close environs of Glasgow their efforts were not very close to the plain English.

"It's Pootnooe", said Cumberland with conviction. "Och, noo, it's bound to be Putnooe", argued Neil.

"Och away wi' you mon, Pootnooe it is", said Cumberland determined to have his way.

Both were rather disappointed when Mike told them that the correct pronunciation was Putnoe, just as it was spelt. When Freddie was asked what he wanted to call his boat, he thought for a few moments and then replied "Dusky Maiden" which showed that he still found the East romantic. My own boat was christened "Jenny Wren" after a namesake in England.

"Jenny Wren" was now undergoing a refit. Although the canoe was designed to carry only two people, a modified canvas canopy had been produced which

converted the canoe into a three-seater. Cumberland and Petty Officer Gascoigne were fitting the new canopy and installing the extra seat. The technique necessary to manage the boat with a crew of three had not yet been evolved, but I was determined to overcome any difficulties which might arise in order to have a man who could accompany me ashore. I had had experience in Sumatra of walking about an enemy beach entirely by myself, and I had been convinced that I was not of the tough fibre from which solitary spies are made. If the three-man canoe could be made to work satisfactorily, I would be able to take Sergeant Cumberland ashore with me and so have company in the darkness.

"When is the operation, Sir?" asked Cumberland in a quiet whisper designed to wheedle information by stressing the soldier to soldier aspect of our relationship. However, I was as ignorant at that moment of our future plans as he was and unable to satisfy his natural desire for news.

When we got back to the transit camp we found that we had company in the persons of "A" Group of the Special Boat Section. Major Holden-White, the commander of the unit, had flown up from Ceylon to plan and execute some of the small-scale raids that were to precede the larger amphibious assaults on the Arakan coast. He was about 24 years old, his appearance was boyish and self-assured; his record of operations was excellent and it was due to be much enhanced during the succeeding months.

His unit used the same kind of canoe as we did but their role was very different. They would land in small parties of four or six men and fight for information. Shooting a Jap soldier and seizing his identity discs, or surprising a small post, killing the occupants, and making off with documents and papers were typical operations of the SBS. By comparison to our stealthy visits, their operations had all the glamour of action, but I do not think that there was one member of our party who would have changed places with one of them.

Freddie came down the verandah steps. We all turned towards him and stopped talking so that he could announce any news that he had straight away. "Hullo, Harry. I hear you are coming down to XV Indian Corps HQ with Alec and me", he said apparently unaware of the tension that he was creating. Harry Holden-White held out his hand. "I believe that is so", he said in his confident manner.

"Any news, Freddie?" asked Mike, unable to control his impatience. "Nothing much yet I'm afraid, Mike. You'll have to wait until we get back from Chiringa". "Where on earth is that?" asked Geoff, exasperated by the slow revelation of news. "It's somewhere near Cox's Bazaar, Geoff. Believe me, if I had any news I would give it to you, but beyond being able to tell you that the future looks rosy I know nothing as yet".

"When will we get back, Freddie?" I asked.

"Not before Saturday so you will need your toothbrush".

I felt elated. It was good to be getting off again and if the future looked rosy our journey would not be fruitless. For the others it was another matter. They would have to wait in Chittagong, do the routine jobs and pass the time until our return. Having tasted the bitterness and disappointment on a previous occasion when Mike had been included in a party flying to Delhi, I felt sorry for them.

The drive to Chiringa in an American staff truck was not a comfortable journey. The roads had been made of bricks, soft red cobblestones that contrasted strikingly with the green of the surrounding jungle. In that part of Bengal there

was very little stone and in order to obtain a road making material which would bear traffic during the monsoons it had been decided to erect brick kilns and bake bricks. The bumps in the road were innumerable and apparently irreparable and we were bruised by the time we had covered the seventy miles to the headquarters of XV Indian Corps. The staff officers were housed in a few bamboo basha huts built on the side of a hill, and we were shown to a large hut used as a mess. All the planning was being conducted in the greatest secrecy inside a guarded bamboo stockade. A number of large-scale operations were being planned simultaneously, and care was taken that as few people as possible knew the details of each.

We were to be placed under the command of 3 Commando Brigade who were to move into a camp at Teknaf within the next fortnight. Teknaf was a small village on the Naaf river, a further seventy miles to the south. In outline, the plan was that the Brigade should seize Elizabeth Island, the Burmese name is Kyunthaya, and use it as an offensive base for about ten days. The island was over one hundred miles behind the front line, which at that time centred around the key points of Buthidaung and Maungdaw in the Arakan Hills. The bombing and strafing of the RAF had forced the Japanese to abandon movement by daylight, and in order to maintain their army in the Arakan they used the chaungs, which formed a maze of waterways in the coastal regions, to bring up their supplies by sampan. The supply sampans moved only at night, and by day they were difficult to detect and destroy, as they remained stationary and camouflaged under the jungle-covered chaung banks. When the Brigade had gained possession of the island, nightly raids could be made on the enemy's waterborne supply lines in an effort to cut off his Arakan army for a week during the crucial stage of the main battle. (See Appendix One.)

The plan suited us admirably and Freddie and I were delighted with the part which our unit was expected to play. The detailed planning was to be carried out with the Commandos' brigade major at the Naval HQ in Chittagong, but we had discovered that we would be required to operate in October. There were only a few days in any month during which we could operate because we needed as many hours of darkness as possible. It would have been stupid to visit the enemy's beaches in full moonlight and expect to return undetected. This meant that the nights for the operation had to be in the dark period - those days between the last quarter and the new moon when the nights were darkest. The almanac showed that the October dark period occurred between the 16th and 20th so there was only a week to prepare the gear and practise the three-man canoe technique before we sailed.

When we returned to the transit camp, our faces told the news to the waiting party and that night there was jubilation in our quarters. I discussed what I knew with Mike.

"Just what we have always wanted", he said beaming with satisfaction. Geoff immediately started persuading Freddie to take him on the trip. Officially Geoff was not an operational member of the party as his job was that of quartermaster, but he was a colourful and fearless character and it was obvious that he intended to have his way this time. Geoff had had all sorts of experience in his life. He became an interservices swimming champion at the age of eighteen, while he was in the Royal Marines. Some trouble in the barrack room had led to his being stabbed in the back with a bayonet. The responsibility for the wound did not rest

entirely with the man who had struck the blow, and to avoid unpleasantness Geoff had bought himself out of the service.

For the next ten years he tried one job after another; he had been fisherman, waiter, chauffeur and half a dozen other things besides before he joined the Metropolitan Police force. When the war came he decided to join the Royal Navy. He realised that the examining medical officers would be interested in the scar of the bayonet wound and he anticipated their curiosity by preparing a story about an operation for pleurisy. While serving in the besieged port of Tobruk, he had volunteered for a parachute course. As a qualified parachutist he was sent to England to join our unit which used canoes but no parachutes.

Mike caught my eye and smiled a silent comment on Geoff's tactics. Leaving Geoff to pursue his objective, we returned to discussing the operation.

"What's the island like?" Mike asked.

I had only had a brief look at the air photographs, but I tried to assist his overworked imagination. "It's in Combermere Bay and about twenty miles from Ramree which, as you probably know, is a strongly fortified island. It is about eight miles long and four wide and is reputed to have no Japanese in occupation. Mike grinned.

"It'll be a pushover", he said with a laugh.

"We've got to get there first", I said soberly, as usual sounding a cautious note.

"How many beaches are there?"

"There are three main beaches but there is also a chaung that will need investigation". Mike became enthusiastic.

"It's just the sort of operation we have been praying for".

"An operation with a point", Freddie remarked bitterly.

The first year of the party's history had been disappointing. When we arrived out from England we discovered that our sister party COPP 7 was engaged on a reconnaissance of Akyab Island. They successfully carried out the task that they had been given, but only after a sailor had been drowned and the leader of the party nearly drowned. Their efforts were not followed by an invasion of the island and, as it turned out, Akyab was never assaulted while the Japanese were in occupation. Then came our first operation. We were to go by submarine to reconnoitre the beaches of the Andaman Islands. The assault force, fifty thousand strong, was to follow in a few weeks. The commander of the expeditionary force had been named and the planning in GHQ Delhi was far advanced. We were delighted to be taking part in the first large amphibious operation in the South East Asia theatre. But it was not to be. The party was recalled from the submarine depot ship and the operation cancelled. The Big Three had decided at the Teheran Conference that all the landing craft that had recently arrived from the Mediterranean must return to carry out the invasion of Southern France. Three weeks later, we went to the Mayu Peninsula to reconnoitre the beaches, which had been in the hands of our own army only eighteen months before. The surf was found to be very heavy and no landing in strength was attempted. During the months that followed the first abortive operation, we all made submarine trips to Sumatra to investigate the beaches on the north tip of the island but again our efforts were not crowned by a landing in strength. Now, at last, we were to embark on a real operation that would be executed within a few weeks and by troops with whom it would be an honour to serve.

Sunday and Monday were spent sorting out the gear that was wanted on the operation from the rest of the party's stores. Freddie had been told that after this operation we should be moving to an advanced base on the Naaf river, so all the stores had to be repacked in readiness. The ratings had caught the enthusiasm radiating from the officers, and though at this stage they could not be told the details of the operation, it was enough for them to know that the next dark period would not be wasted. The truck had gone, so Mike and I began to walk down to the naval depot. The railway ran alongside the road as if it were a displaced tramway, and on the sleepers lay a dead dog. His four legs pointed to the sky and his body was blown up tight like a toy balloon. The smell was nauseating and I found that a lungful of air was not sufficient to allow me to walk out of range. Mike found his lung capacity equally insufficient, but I think that I was nearer to vomiting than he was. What amazed me was that two Indian gentlemen were conversing within ten feet of the carcass and on its lee side and yet were apparently unconscious of the stink of putrefaction. From the depths of my squeamish stomach, and from the back of my sensitive nose, came unbounded admiration for these Indians who carried their gas masks internally. On 10th October, Freddie and I went up to the Naval HQ to meet Major Drysdale, the Commando brigade major. We were soon seated around a table with Drysdale, Harry Holden-White of the SBS and the commander of the Arakan Coastal forces, Commander Ashby. Drysdale took charge of the proceedings. "I think that we will plan the SBS operation first because it will take less time", he said.

Everybody nodded their agreement. It did not take long to settle the details of Harry's first raid. It was to be a landing on Ramree Island, with the object of securing an identification. A few minutes later, Drysdale dismissed Harry. "All right, HoldenWhite, that finishes your part", he said in his easy accents.

"I'd like to stay on and hear about the other operation", said Harry.

"I'm afraid that I can't allow that", Drysdale told him.

"But they have heard all about my operation. Surely I can hear about theirs?"

He had to go. It was not only our operation he would hear about but also the whole assault by the Commando Brigade, and as he was going into enemy territory before the date planned for the attack on Elizabeth Island, it was obviously better that he should remain in ignorance.

The preliminary planning of our operation took seven hours. The code-name was to be "David". It is always encouraging to have a good code-name and "David" seemed to be a happy choice for our small operation and might encourage a follow-up Commando victory in a few weeks. There were three main beaches on the island; Onchaung in the south-west, Ondaw in the north-west and Kyunthaya in the southeast. Apart from these, there was a large chaung on the northern side of the island that meandered up to a village and this too had to be visited.

Drysdale agreed to meet us at Teknaf after each sortie to collect preliminary reports. The Brigade wanted to land all the beaches simultaneously. Freddie said that it would take us four nights to survey all the beaches and the chaung, and this pronouncement was received without comment.

From our point of view, there was one great drawback attached to work on the Burma coast and that was the impracticability of using submarines.

Unfortunately for us, submarines were not allowed to sail inshore of the ten fathom line, and this contour was usually about ten miles from the Arakan coast.

As we had to paddle the canoes, and as our average speed was two and a half knots - without taking account of adverse winds and tides - it was impossible to cover the twenty miles to and from the submarine and still have darkness in which to reconnoitre the beach.

With submarines ruled out, the best craft was the Fairmile B Motor Launch and we had had experience of landing from one of these during the operations of the previous December. By comparison with the submarine, the ML had the great disadvantage of not being able to inspect the enemy coast in daylight. Through the powerful lenses of the submarine's periscope, we had been able to gaze at the Sumatran beaches in comfort, and before we had ever set foot in the canoes we had become familiar with the aspects of the coast-line. To land "blind", except for air photographs and maps, was an additional hazard.

Freddie leaned over to Drysdale. "Do you think that it would be possible for one of us to fly over the island before we go there?" he asked. Drysdale seemed to be mildly surprised but replied "I think that it might be arranged. I'll give you a ring tonight".

When we were outside the HQ and walking to our truck Freddie said, "That was a brain wave, don't you think, Alec?"

I had to agree, but my mind was on another point. "I suppose you will be going on the trip?" I asked.

"We'll see about that when we hear from Drysdale this evening", he replied in a noncommittal way.

It was a tired but happy party that gathered in the rest camp that night. Mike had been testing all the infra-red transmitters and receivers which we would use on the operation for finding our way from the beach to the anchored ML. Geoff and Gerry had been trying to understand army stores' procedure in an effort to procure stores from the Chittagong depots. All the work had proved fruitful, and Freddie was able to report that the planning had gone successfully.

"I know one item of equipment that we shall not require on this operation", said Mike. Gerry pricked up his ears. "And what is that, Mike?" he asked eagerly. "That wretched Chota".

"Either the monkey goes or I don't", Geoff announced.

"Well, you will certainly have to look after it better this time", said Freddie entering the fray.

Chota hopped onto Geoff's shoulder, pulled his beard and said "Oo Oo", which showed that she had realised that she was the subject of the discussion.

The year before, we had embarked on an ML at Cocanada and at the time Chota had only been on the party's strength for a few weeks. She was a small monkey, and only a month previously had been running wild in the jungle. Geoff was the only master she recognised, and although she would accept attention from almost anyone when her owner was out of sight, immediately she saw him returning she would bite the hand that had been befriending her. This trait made her unpopular with the rest of the party, and it soon proved to be only one of a long list of criminal habits.

We had been on board the ML for three weeks by the time we landed again at Cocanada and we were very glad to be able to escape from the little beast. On the voyage, Chota had seized the captain's cigarettes and methodically pulled every one to pieces. She had stolen bananas, and when discovered had crammed as much of the fruit into her mouth and pouches as she could before the avenging

hand of the cook overtook her. Her crimes were too many to catalogue and far outweighed her attractions in everyone's opinion except Geoff's.

We considered the punishments he inflicted on his monkey always fell short of what justice demanded, and it was not until months afterwards, when Chota had torn up some valuable rupee notes belonging to her master, that he gave her a just thrashing. However, on one occasion during the voyage she made the tactical error of committing a crime while her master was ashore and there was therefore no one to defend her. The whole crew and those members of the party who were on board at the time took part in the chase. The screaming monkey raced round and round the deck, over and under rigging and guns, chased or headed off by a large number of enthusiastic hunters.

At last the wretched creature was trapped in the paint locker and soon after was brought out by the scruff of the neck. She bared her teeth in a grin of expectancy, and squeaked quietly being too frightened to think of biting anyone and too apprehensive of her punishment to make any effort to escape. She was a pathetic prisoner and quite unlike the arrogant wrongdoer to whom we were all accustomed. The blows administered to her little patch of bare bottom kept her out of mischief for some time. And her master was surprised at the quietness of his pet when he returned on board.

A mess orderly came upstairs and told Freddie that he was wanted on the telephone. I guessed that it was Drysdale and could hardly wait for his return.

The others sipped their drinks, unaware of the probable subject of the call.

Freddie came upstairs again and I was afraid that he might decide to keep any news he had got to himself for the time being. I need not have worried.

"It's a Beaufighter, Alec, so you can go. I had made up my mind that if we were allotted a Mosquito I would not miss the trip myself, but I have got quite enough to do here".

"What's all this?" chorused the others.

"I got permission for one of us to fly over the island". Freddie explained "and I have decided to let Alec go".

"Isn't there room for two of us?" asked Mike hopefully.

I was on the aerodrome at Chittagong with plenty of time to spare before the Beaufighter was due, but when I reached the control building the pilot was waiting for me. He was a Canadian and about the same age as myself. He had had to fly from his own airfield further forward in order to pick me up. We reached the aircraft and he introduced me to his wireless operator/airgunner who was an Englishman of rather more staid disposition than the pilot.

"You know where you want to go?" the pilot asked me. I liked the delightfully casual way of starting off on an operational flight, which contrasted so markedly with the detailed preparations that we indulged in.

"All right, there is no point in hanging about. Let's be off", the pilot said and his airgunner climbed into the aircraft. I was given a parachute to put on and soon I was standing behind the pilot's seat and over the access door. The engines roared and we raced down the runway towards the mouth of the Karnapuli river. As the aircraft gained height, the pilot set a course that was almost parallel to the coastline. The minutes passed and there was little to see. I could just make out St Martin's Islands, which I knew were off the Naaf river, and then we were beyond the limits of any previous trip that I had made.

The pilot half turned his head and shouted "See over there on the left, that's Akyab Island".

I was suitably impressed. "What happens if a Zero comes after us?" I asked and tried to keep the nervousness out of my voice.

"We'd show them a clean pair of heels. I've done it before" he said confidently.

I was not fully convinced. I had heard too much about the speed and manoeuvrability of the Japanese fighters to believe that our heavy twin-engined aircraft would be able to outpace them.

"Never had any trouble yet", he shouted again. "We were down the coast the other day strafing a convoy south of Rangoon. We did a lot of damage, but they never came after us". I felt my parachute and said no more.

We flew into Combermere Bay, and in the distance I could see Ramree Island. I tried hard not to think of the Japanese airfields that I knew were located there.

"That's Elizabeth Island", he said pointing ahead. "What do you want to do now?"

I asked him to fly over the island from north to south so that I could have a general look at it. He flew over the coast and started down the eight miles of the island's length. He banked to port and then to starboard, and I found the view presented out of the right hand side of the windshield and then out of the left.

"Sorry, evasive action", he shouted in explanation of his aerobatics. "Trouble is that you can't tell when anyone is firing small arms at you until you see the holes appearing in the fuselage. It is sometimes too late then, so we always take evasive action".

I was quite happy to be taking evasive action. In fact, I thought that it was a very good idea even if it did make seeing the island a little more difficult. There was nothing to be seen below except jungle and paddy; there was no sign of any Japanese. We turned and flew back on our zigzag course. The island looked peaceful in the extreme.

"Seen enough?" the pilot asked.

I asked to fly the same course again, but for all my peering I could see no sign of the hostile presence.

"What next?" he asked laconically.

I asked him to fly towards the island at sea level, and on a particular bearing, so that I could sketch the aspect of Onchaung beach from the very angle from which we would approach it in the ML. This was a special duty for Freddie to help him with his navigation.

We flew out to sea for some miles before turning towards the island. The aircraft pulled out of a steep dive and raced over the waves to Onchaung beach. Peering over the pilot's shoulder, I sketched rapidly and managed to get the outline of the coast onto the paper before we zoomed upwards on crossing the beach. I made sure of taking a good look at the beach for any signs of the enemy, but there was nothing. The intelligence branch was right; the island was not occupied by the Japanese.

"What now?" the pilot asked.

I told him that I had seen enough, but that I thought we ought to strafe something so as to give a reason for our visit, and to save the enemy from scratching his head and trying to discover our purpose. We turned north of the island and on the sea below we could pick out a few small fishing boats. "

How about one of those?" he asked.

They seemed very defenceless, but I knew that the RAF had orders to sink anything floating south of the "bomb line" which was then located near the Naaf river. He swung his gunsight into position in the centre of the windshield and put the aircraft into a shallow dive. His thumb pressed the button on top of the control column. The four cannon under the floorboards crashed in unison, and the cabin was filled with cordite fumes. The sea ahead whipped into a series of small waterspouts as the shells exploded, and although the boat was not hit I saw the astonished fisherman overbalance and fall into the water. The aircraft flattened out and headed for the entrance to Com berm ere Bay.

We flew out to sea and turned north towards the Indian border. As soon as the mouth of the Naaf river appeared to starboard, the pilot banked his aircraft shorewards and brought it down to an altitude of a few feet. The Beaufighter then roared over the wide strip of beach at such a height that I thought the propellers would leave a weird track in the sand. A small moving dot on the sand ahead rapidly expanded into a jeep loaded with soldiers and as we passed overhead it seemed that we must strike them. "They didn't duck", yelled the pilot. "Any jeep that I fly over, the people have to duck".

A few miles further on we saw a 15cwt truck driving towards us. We dipped over it in salute and the occupants nearly fell out in their scramble to reach the floorboards. "That's better. I am happy now", shouted the pilot jubilantly.

I was quite happy to step onto the tarmac of Chittagong aerodrome. The airgunner jumped out and stretched himself. "What the hell did you want to shoot up that wretched fisherman for?" he asked his captain.

"We had to give some reason for our visit, and that was the best one I could think of", he replied unperturbed.

"Well, it's a good thing that you're such a rotten shot. I should have been sick if you had hit him". The pilot did not show any signs of feeling uncomfortable. He turned to me. "When are you going down there?" he asked. "

I'm afraid that I can't tell you that", I said.

"No, I suppose not. Anyway, the best of luck when you do go. I wish that we could go with you. So long. We'll have to be getting back now".

I shook hands with them both, and watched the Beaufighter take off and head for its base further south. Mike was sitting on his bed when I walked into the room.

"How did you get on? Shoot down any enemy planes?" he asked.

I told him briefly what had happened and showed him the sketch that I had drawn of the coastline behind Onchaung beach.

"Didn't you see any Japs?" The disappointment sounded in his voice and he handed back the sketch. "The lads finished converting "Jenny Wren" to a three-man", he said. "That's fine, Mike. Did you try it out?"

"We tried it in the shed but did not get as far as putting it in the water. The man who sits in the bows has got the anchor reel between his knees and it's a pretty tight squeeze."

"I am not going to sit there anyway", I said. "I have decided to take the back seat, put Cumberland in the middle and Duffy in front".

"You'll be able to try it on the exercise and see how it goes" he replied. "When are we sailing, Mike?" I asked.

"I don't know exactly, but it will be some time tomorrow morning. Freddie is fixing it up with Commander Ashby this afternoon".

That afternoon we concentrated our attention on the air photographs, charts and maps of Elizabeth Island, and Freddie appeared to be quite satisfied with my sketch. Geoff and Gerry supervised the final packing of the stores, and by evening we were all ready for a good Chinese supper in place of the transit camp food. Spirits were high as we sat down to spring chicken and fried prawn balls in Green's Chinese Restaurant.

Next morning, Geoff commandeered a three-ton lorry from the rest camp and, without waiting to argue about the legality of his action, we clambered over the tailboard. The ML that had been allotted for Operation David was ML 829 of the South African flotilla. We arrived at the sheds to find her already tied up alongside. Loading was soon completed and we were ready to move.

"All gone for'ard, Sir", shouted a sailor.

"All gone aft", came as an echo from the stern.

As the ML started to move down river, we had a chance to look about and stow our gear in out of the way places. The ML had three officers; Lieutenant Williams, the captain, Lieutenant Prosser and Sub-Lieutenant McGovern. The crew numbered about a dozen sunburnt South African seamen. In addition to these, there were now four officers and four ratings belonging to our party. The Fairmile B Motor Launch was just over a hundred feet long but into this small hull were fitted a large assortment of guns. On the foredeck there was a quick-firing three-pounder gun; on each side of the bridge was a pair of Vickers K machine guns; abaft the funnel was a 20mm Oerlikon, and at the stem was a 40mm Bofors gun. The two aero engines, which gave the ML a top speed of 19 knots, were most efficiently silenced and at low speeds made very little noise. Apart from the rope locker, the wardroom was the only compartment astern of the engines and from the bottom of the companionway there was a short passage, between the galley and the lavatory, which led to it.

Prosser came down the steps. He was a large man who appeared to be bulging out of his white shorts and shirt.

"I don't know how we're all going to fit in", he said.

"Mike and I will sleep on deck", I volunteered. "We did on the last trip and it's much more comfortable".

"I quite agree", he said and then added lugubriously "provided it doesn't rain".

We laughed the laugh of the confident. "Don't worry about us", Freddie said.

"We'll find somewhere to bed down".

Mike and I went forward and asked permission to go on the bridge. Williams was a slight, dark man of about thirty-five. He was very courteous and there was usually a smile on his face. Mike asked if he might go into the small chart room, but I stayed and enjoyed the breezes on deck.

We were going to do two full-scale exercises off Kutubdia Island, which is about sixty miles south of Chittagong. Apart from refreshing us in our own technique, the exercises were to give the ML crew a chance to practise launching and recovering the canoes in the open sea and under conditions approximating to the real thing. An afternoon of idleness passed all too quickly and Freddie was shaking me and wanting to discuss the details of the night's work. Two canoes were going to take part; one with Freddie and Petty Officer Gascoigne and the other with Leading Seaman Neil, Cumberland and myself. The canoes had to be checked and all my personal clothing and equipment also needed inspection. On these occasions, the canoe became a small warship.

It had its own anchor and reel of line. In the canvas pouches were stowed many different pieces of gear. There were the large naval night binoculars, the infra-red transmitter, sounding lead and line, Sten gun, grenades, hand-bearing compass, P8 steering compass and water bottles and rations to sustain the crew in the event of their being abandoned in enemy territory. I found Cumberland and Neil already dressed and putting the finishing touches to "Jenny Wren". Cumberland said that everything was ready. Before joining the Commandos he had been a regular soldier in the Royal Scots, which regiment he never tired of telling you was "the fust o' fooot and the right o' the line". In peacetime India, he had been the Army's lightweight boxing champion and his nose showed the marks of his hard schooling.

I went down to the wardroom to put on my swimsuit. This was a two-piece suit of light, waterproof material that protected the body from sharp rocks and fish stings. On my feet I wore a pair of light canvas jungle boots. The many pockets of the suit were filled with equipment necessary for the reconnaissance or for the maintenance of life if I was unfortunate enough to be stranded on an enemy beach.

There were pencils, plastic writing tablets, measuring string, compass, emergency rations, torch, revolver, fighting knife and a small plastic container which diffused a shark scaring substance (copper sulphate crystals) into the water. No one knew if it was effective; it was a case of swim and try. The jacket of the suit was fitted with an inflatable rubber lifebelt and also a kapok lifebelt that served the double purpose of protecting its rubber colleague and giving additional buoyancy.

The exercises proved quite satisfactory except for Neil. The three-man canoe capsized and, although Cumberland and I were able to escape quite easily, Neil found himself trapped by the anchor reel and spent some uncomfortable minutes under water before we could release him.

The ML returned to Chittagong on 14th October, which allowed us 24 hours to repair and re-waterproof the gear used on the exercises. We sailed in company with ML 382 during the evening of Sunday 15th October. The two MLs anchored at the mouth of the Karnapuli and it was very peaceful when I stretched out in my sleeping bag on deck. I woke up at 3.00 am to find the ML moving south. The muffled throb coming from the squat funnel combined with the noise of the water splashing past the hull to make an effective soporific. I was soon asleep again, but at 4.00 we ran into rain and there was a scramble of sleepy bodies down the companionway into the wardroom.

Monday was fine. As we sailed down the coast, Freddie called a conference for the whole party and briefed everyone for the first sortie. The ratings were told everything and shown everything that might be of assistance to them. Freddie had decided to take three canoes; "Dusky Maiden" with Gascoigne and himself, "Putnoe" with Mike and Neil and "Jenny Wren" with Duffy, Cumberland and me. Duffy was really the Corporal draughtsman but he had been so keen to go on an operation that with the advent of the three-man canoe he was to realise his ambition. As darkness fell and the distant outline of the Boronga Islands disappeared into the gathering gloom, Williams turned his ship into Combermere Bay and towards Elizabeth Island. MLs of the Arakan Coastal Forces were always prowling down the coast in search of prey. The Japanese had grown accustomed to seeing them and, although they seldom gave battle at sea, they had organised

many groups of native coast watchers whose duty it was to light a beacon when an ML was seen approaching the coast. Williams had taken great care that his ship should not be seen entering Combermere Bay. ML 382 followed in our wake as we turned east. The canoes were ready and the members of the party were ready. Freddie was on the bridge navigating the ML to the exact position, one and a half miles from Onchaung beach, where the canoes were to be launched. We waited in the darkness and peered at the black outline of Elizabeth Island. It looked much more sinister than it had done in the bright sunshine five days before. I spoke to Mike in an undertone and he replied softly. There was no need to whisper, but the proximity of the enemy coast made a loud voice unwelcome. The engines were idling. The freed clutch set up an eerie and rhythmical whine – Yaow yaow yaow yaow yaow "

And it continued for some minutes.

Then, with a pulse of sound from the funnel the ship started moving forward once again.

"I wish they would get there and let us start", I said.

Mike turned towards me. "I quite agree", he said. "This waiting is no fun". The engines were idling once more as the officers on the bridge took compass bearings to fix the position. Half a mile makes all the difference when you have to paddle it, and the extra minutes needed to cover it might throw out of gear the whole timetable for the night. The clutch was singing its weird song again. But once more the funnel announced with a quickening throb that we had not yet arrived at our anchorage.

"There's one thing about these ML trips", said Mike. "At least you arrive at your destination after a short sea voyage in fresh air, and not after a fortnight of stuffy submarine travel". The clutch replied with another verse of its song, but this time its voice was joined by the rattle of the anchor cable. "We're there", said Mike unnecessarily.

The throb of the engines increased momentarily and then died away altogether. A wisp of white smoke eddied upwards from the funnel like the last breath of a dying dragon. Dark figures moved about the deck, and astern ML 382 was approaching to come alongside. The minutes dragged by as the ML manoeuvred into position and by the time that the two ships were secured gunwale to gunwale, the scheduled starting time had come and gone.

Prosser brought his launching crew aft and "Dusky Maiden" was hoisted over the side and lowered into the water. Freddie waved to Geoff and Williams. "See you in a few hours time", he said. He gripped the stanchions and started descending the ladder to the canoe bobbing on the water below. Gascoigne quickly followed him. "Cast off", Freddie called in a loud whisper. The seamen lifted "Putnoe" and lowered her into the water with a smack. Mike and Neil disappeared over the side as if they were Neptune's servants and accustomed to visiting ships in the night. Mike called, and the ropes were dropped by the launching crew. "Jenny Wren" was soon on the way to join her sister canoes. Duffy started the descent with Cumberland only a step behind. They squeezed themselves into the boat and I slid into the rear seat. Duffy caught the fore rope but the aft one fell into the water and I had to fish it out with a paddle.

Cumberland joined the ends. We were ready. I signalled Freddie and he started paddling for the beach.

The P8 compass was similar to those carried in single-seater fighters. In the canoe, it was shipped in front of the bow man and Freddie was steering by the luminous dial which was protected by the canopy. Mike and I followed, one a little to starboard of Freddie's stem and the other a little to port. The sea seemed flat and oily, and we paddled on as though we were on a Bank Holiday outing on the Serpentine. The minutes passed and the coastline rose higher and higher in front of us. There was high ground all around Onchaung, and the village itself was only a couple of hundred yards behind the beach. The beach was sandy and was divided into two small crescent shaped coves by a rocky knoll, which jutted out into the sea. The knoll must have been about sixty feet high and was connected to the land by a narrow neck of jungle and palm.

Freddie stopped paddling. We seemed to be off the right-hand beach. Freddie held the hand-bearing compass to his eye. Mike paddled alongside "Dusky Maiden". They moved on for a few minutes and then Freddie stopped again. Mike spoke quite loudly because the sound of the surf breaking on the beach would have masked a cannon shot. "I think we have a bit further to go to the west". We paddled on, and then ahead we could see the rocky projection of the knoll.

Freddie headed out to sea in order to skirt round the knoll and enter the western half of the beach. He stopped paddling, and held his paddle horizontal to indicate that he wanted to talk. We moved alongside "Dusky maiden" and held on so that the three canoes were side by side.

"We're forty minutes late, I'm afraid", said Freddie. "It is 23.30 now so you will have only an hour and a half ashore. Alec, I think you had better confine your activities to this half of the beach and not bother about the other half. Mike, if you will get the gradients on this half of the beach, I will paddle round to the other half and work there".

Mike and I said that we were ready.

"OK. You can go. Don't bother about anchoring your canoes. I will see to that after you have gone".

Duffy pushed "Jenny Wren" clear and dipped his paddle to take us forward of the others. "Ready?" I asked. "I'm getting out portside". I pulled my legs up and swung them over the side; as I dropped into the water, Cumberland and Duffy leant over to starboard to balance the canoe. The water was cold on first contact, but I soon realised that it was really quite warm. I worked my way along the canoe until I was level with Duffy in the front seat. Cumberland splashed into the water behind me. "Ready?" I called to him.

"Just a minute, Sir. I want to get this Sten gun slung over my shoulder" He struggled and Duffy leaned out of his seat to help him.

"OK. Sir".

I started to swim towards the side of the knoll. There was little more than a hundred yards of water to cross, and ahead I could see the white foam of the breaking waves. Looking back, I saw Cumberland, with the barrel of his gun projecting above his head, blowing like a sea monster. As we got closer to the rocks, I could see the waves breaking over the large rocks and sucking back with unpleasant force. Towering above was the jungle covered top of the knoll. A wave thrust me forward onto the rocks and I gripped tightly with my fingers where I could. However, the supporting water vanished as the wave sucked back its strength for another onslaught, and I found myself clinging like a fly. I lost my hold and fell back into the water. The next wave threw me forward again, and I

managed to hold on when it withdrew its support. Cumberland came up on the next wave as if it were a lift, and he too climbed out of the water. The base of the knoll was composed of rocks of all sizes, and it was impossible to move forward noiselessly. I felt grateful for the thunder of the surf.

"Got your gun ready?" I whispered. "And for God's sake don't cock the wretched thing". I moved forward with Cumberland covering me. When I stopped, he came forward. The stones clattered under our feet, but I knew that we had not far to go before we reached the sand. I stopped by a big boulder that overlooked the first stretch of sand. Cumberland joined me. I put my mouth to his ear and whispered "I'm going to move around to the neck of land that joins this knoll. Then we'll have a look at that track which we saw on the air photos". He nodded agreement but said nothing. I worked my way clear of the rocks and reached the sand. Here and there boulders broke the clean surface of the sea-washed sand and provided excellent cover. Suddenly I noticed a patch of lighted sand on my right. The beam of light was coming from some source in the narrow neck of land. I froze. Slowly I turned my head and beckoned to Cumberland. It was strange that a light should be coming from this area because the air photographs had revealed no huts nor had I seen any from the Beaufighter. Cumberland crawled up beside me.

"See the light?" I asked. "I don't like the look of it. I want to move forward until I can see where it is coming from. Get the Sten gun ready and cover me".

Cumberland nodded. I tugged the revolver out of its canvas holster, though experience had taught me that the chances of it firing after immersion in sandy seawater were small. I pulled myself forward by pivoting my weight on toes and elbows; in a few seconds I was at the edge of the wedge-shaped path of light. The light was coming from the open door of a hut, and inside I could see men's shadows on the wall. There was a murmur of voices but with the roar of the surf in my ears it was impossible to guess what language was being spoken. Then I saw the mosquito nets. One was hanging over a bed just inside the door. That could mean only one thing.

Suddenly I felt very naked and alone like an unwanted baby on an inhospitable doorstep. I could see no sign of a sentry near the hut, but at any moment someone might come out of the door forty feet away. I did not feel confident of being taken for a rock at that range. In order to reach the narrow neck of palms and jungle, we would have to cross the path of the light and pass close to the hut. The risk of being discovered and thereby compromising the Commando Brigade's operation seemed unnecessarily great. I pulled myself back as quickly as I could and re-joined Cumberland.

"We won't go this way. They're either Japs or native troops. Burmese fishermen don't use mosquito nets. We'll go back to the water and get ashore at the centre of the beach". We wasted no time in moving back to the rocks of the knoll, and from there we were soon in the sea once again. The surf on the sandy part of the beach was three to four feet high and it was breaking sixty yards out. We found Mike battling with the sea in his efforts to take some lines of soundings. I was very glad to see him.

"This is hopeless", he almost shouted to make himself heard above the noise of the surf. "I can't swim out against this and take soundings every few feet".

I told him about our experiences. He looked at his watch.

"We've had three-quarters of an hour already, and I don't think we are going to find it very easy to swim out to the canoes".

"I agree with you, Mike", I said. "I don't think that Cumberland and I could get very far knowing that we should have to make the outward and return journeys in threequarters of an hour".

"No", said Mike. "I think it would be as well to start to try to reach the canoes now in case we have trouble".

Being agreed, we started to swim out against the surf. It was hard work. The kapok lifebelts made it almost impossible to dive through the incoming breakers and we were thrown back towards the beach like pieces of driftwood. Fifteen minutes of struggling was enough to convince us that we should never be able to reach the canoes that way. I grabbed at Mike.

"We'll have to go back the way Cumberland and I came in. If we climb back over the rocks we will be able to swim from beyond the line of breakers".

The three of us staggered through the surf to the rocks of the knoll and then clambered over them to the point where Cumberland and I had landed. Dropping into the sea in the backwash of a wave, we started swimming in the direction of the anchored canoes. "That should be far enough", said Mike. "We'll show our torches now".

We trod water and pulled out our specially shaded blue torches and pointed them in the direction of the canoes. In the entrance to the small cove the long swell, which was almost imperceptible in the open sea, rolled onto the beach in waves that periodically lifted us and dropped us. Mike held his torch high above his head so that the men in the canoes would be able to see the light even when he himself was in the trough of a wave. As our eerie blue lights rose and fell, the three of us might have been taking part in some ritual torch dance for the amusement of the ancient sea-god. However, we were unconscious of the spectacle we made; our eyes were fixed on the dark oily sea over which we hoped our canoes would glide to pick us up.

The minutes passed. I thought of Duffy. He would have seen our lights by now. In haste, he would pull in the cringle, which secured the anchor line at the bows, haul in the fathoms of line and ship the small non-magnetic anchor. Releasing a paddle from the rubber thongs holding it to the canvas deck of the canoe, he would dip the blades and drive the canoe towards the flashing blue light.

"There it is", Mike said, and at that instant I saw a dark shadow moving over the sea. Duffy had come alone.

"The CO is not back", he whispered, "so Neil stayed at anchor". Cumberland handed his Sten gun to Duffy, and working himself round to the stem of "Jenny Wren" he prepared to climb aboard. "Ready?" he called. "I'm getting on port side". Duffy leaned over to starboard as Cumberland swung his leg over the stem canvas and sat astride the canoe. Slowly he edged forward, legs first, until he had crossed the rear seat and slipped into his own. I pulled myself out of the water and slid into the rear seat. "Hang on, Mike", I said. The three paddles dug into the water together and the canoe moved sluggishly through the water dragging Mike behind. A few strokes brought us to "Putnoe". We manoeuvred "Jenny Wren" alongside and held on to save dropping anchor again. Mike climbed into his own canoe.

"When did the CO say he would be back, Neil?" Mike asked.

"He didn't say, Sir, but I imagined that he would be back by swimmer recovery time". "We're a quarter of an hour early so I don't suppose that he will be back for a while yet", I said.

"We saw nothing from here, Sir. How did you get on ashore?"

The five of us discussed the night's meagre results while we sat two hundred yards from the beach and waited for Freddie. When he arrived, the tale of woe was repeated and after a short chat Mike weighed "Putnoe"'s anchor and the three canoes headed for the MLs.

There was a strong-cross tide and we paddled for three-quarters of an hour before Freddie stopped to see whether he could pick up the infra-red transmissions that Geoff was sending from the bridge of ML 829. The glassy swell caused little up and down movement of the canoes so that, through the special receivers, the slowly winking light was easy to see. We paddled on and in fifteen minutes the black bulk of the MLs loomed out of the darkness. It was only when we closed the stationary vessels that we realised the full force of the cross-tide. Freddie went alongside first and the crews of "Putnoe" and "Jenny Wren" had to work hard to keep their canoes close to the MLs. Geoff leaned over the rail and encouraged us in our efforts. "No wonder you have had to paddle hard. I have just measured the current here and it's two and a half knots!"

It felt like it. Eventually, it was our turn to come alongside. A sailor was standing on the lowest rung of the ML's ladder and, holding on with his right hand, he held out his left to receive our painter. He passed the rope to other hands stretching eagerly downwards from the deck. It was a relief to be able to stop paddling. I grasped the uprights of the ladder and pulled myself out of the canoe. The other two followed. Geoff welcomed us with a pat and a friendly word.

Standing near the Bofors in the stem, I started to strip off my wet swimsuit. The night air was cold on my salt-caked and sweat-soaked skin. As I rubbed myself with a towel, I saw the ladder hauled over the side of the ML and almost simultaneously the funnel belched dense, white smoke. ML 382 burst into life and, casting off the ropes that held her to us, glided forward. From for'ard came the rattle of the anchor and then we too gathered way. I looked at my watch. It was just half past two. The warm drink in the wardroom was very pleasant. Geoff showed us what he had been doing; a carefully drawn silhouette of the island and tide measurements taken throughout the time that the MLs had been anchored.

Pleasant though it was in the wardroom, it was infinitely better to crawl into my sleeping bag on deck. The night was clear, and the stars in their thousands made the night's work seem more insignificant than ever. It was very comforting to lie there and gaze upwards while the powerful engines thrummed their pulsating rhythm and the water splashed rapidly past the hull. I felt quite safe now. The responsibility belonged to others and I was quite prepared to trust them implicitly. "That feels better", Mike said from the other side of the hatchway. Passing feet and legs brushed against my subconscious mind long before I awoke. At last, the urgent clamour of a new day overcame the lethargy that gripped my will. Even when the struggle to remain asleep had been abandoned, I lay for some minutes in my sleeping bag. It was a lovely day and, as yet, pleasantly cool. Away to the east was the hazy blue outline of Japanese occupied Burma. A few hundred yards astern, the sharp bow of ML 382 sliced through the water. By screwing round in my sleeping bag, I could see McGovern on the

bridge. It was hard to believe there was a war on. Perhaps after all, those mountains were not the Arakan Yomas.

In the wardroom Mike was transcribing the hieroglyphics on his underwater writing tablets into ordinary English letters and figures.

"I wondered if you were ever going to get up, you slug", he remarked amiably. "What time are we eating?" I asked.

"Some of them have eaten already, but I think the popular time will be when McGovern comes off duty".

When breakfast was over, Freddie called a conference to collate all the information that had been gathered during the night. A large-scale map of Onchaung beach and its approaches had been prepared before the operation began and now all the details were to be superimposed. Freddie had charted many of the rocks in the bay and had taken a number of soundings off both beaches. Mike had some soundings to record, though the surf had prevented him from taking any very far out. All I had to offer was the information about the lookout post, and an opinion on the bearing capacity of the beach. Geoff produced his silhouette and figures for the rate of flow of the tide in the MLs' anchoring position. The complete information on the beach seemed quite lengthy, but we all felt a little ashamed of it and disappointed that a small loss of time and the strong surf should have combined to thwart our attempts to make a signal success of the operation.

When we went on deck again, the St Martin's Islands lay astern and we were approaching the entrance to the Naaf river. A shrilling bell summoned the crew to action stations and while we became aware that we were helpless passengers the South Africans doubled smartly to their gun positions and donned their steel helmets. The rating sitting on one of the Bofors' control seats traversed the gun to starboard, and the Oerlikon swung in the direction that the pointing barrel indicated. The southern bank of the river looked very peaceful and I wondered what the trouble was. I went up to the bridge and asked Williams. Apparently, all MLs had to go to action stations on entering the Naaf river as a mark of respect for the daring and enterprise of a handful of Japanese gunners. One night, these soldiers had manhandled a small mountain gun from the crest of the Mayu ridge to a clump of cypress bushes on the southern bank of the river. The next ML to enter the river was surprised to come under fire when it thought it was safely home. Ever since that day, MLs entering the Naaf had gone to action stations, but today there was no sign of the little men or their gun.

At Teknaf, we anchored off the jetty and while the MLs re-fuelled we were visited by Major Drysdale of the Commando Brigade. Laid out on the wardroom table he saw the details of our night's work. The four of us gathered round him ready with our excuses and explanations, should his disappointment prove too keen. However, he seemed quite pleased with the results and his pleasure was like salve to our sores of frustration.

"Were the people in the hut Japanese?" he asked me.

"I wouldn't like to swear to that", I told him, "but I think I can say they were soldiers or coast watchers".

He appeared to be satisfied.

There was much to do in the afternoon. Tommy guns, Sten guns and pistols had to be reduced to their component parts, dried, cleaned, lavishly oiled and re-assembled. Grenades had to be dismantled and inspected for dampness. The

waterproofing of the compasses, torches and infra-red equipment had to be checked and renewed if necessary. Nothing could be left to chance for on details our lives depended. None of us felt like saying "Oh well, it worked last night. It will probably work again".

In April, Freddie had left the submarine *Stoic* to reconnoitre the beaches near the Sumatran port of Lloksomawe. The canoe overturned when it was launched from the casing of the submarine and everything inside it was soaked. Freddie had decided to continue the sortie and paddled for the beach. However, when the time came to return to the submarine it was found that the infra-red transmitting and receiving apparatus were unserviceable. Freddie spent four hours, a thousand miles from the nearest allied territory, trying to contact the parent craft. At last, in answer to unshaded torch flashes, the searching submarine located the canoe just as dawn was breaking. With Freddie's experience fresh in our minds, there was no complacency apparent in our preparations.

It was a pleasant evening and we were untroubled by the mosquitoes which would have compelled the wearing of long sleeves and trousers on shore. Geoff was very happy, as he had persuaded Freddie to let him go ashore the next night. There was a little drinking and singing, but it was still early when we went to bed.

Next morning, we sailed at 11 o'clock and, after paying our respects to the cypress clump, we veered southwards. Freddie called the party together to discuss the night's operation. The beach was near the village of Ondaw, on the opposite side of the island from Onchaung. Being sheltered from the swell of Combermere Bay, Freddie thought that the heavy surf experienced at Onchaung would be absent. The beach was almost semicircular in shape but a small outcrop of rock divided the sandy part of the beach into two segments. Close behind the eastern segment a cluster of huts was visible on the air photographs. There was another group of huts behind the western segment but they were considerably further from the water's edge.

Cumberland pulled my sleeve.

"I have been pretty sick today, Sir, and I would prefer not to swim tonight. I will go in the canoe if necessary"" he said.

This was a blow. I turned to Freddie and told him the news.

"Who will you take with you?" he asked.

Gascoigne had heard the conversation.

"I'll come with you, Sir", he offered.

"All right, Gascoigne. It will be a truly combined operation tonight", I replied.

So it was settled. Petty Officer Gascoigne and I would do the military reconnaissance. I was quite satisfied, as I knew Gascoigne to be fearless and very easy to get along with. Freddie decided to stand down from the operational party. There were two more sorties after tonight's and Ondaw promised to be a straightforward beach. Mike was to be in charge of the party and with Neil would paddle "*Putnoe*". Geoff would go in "*Dusky Maiden*" with Duffy and "*Jenny Wren*" would carry Cumberland, Gascoigne and myself.

With the last detail arranged, I sat down on the wardroom hatch to enjoy the hot sun. Mike came up the companionway.

"I've got another attack of this stomach trouble, Alec", he said.

This was bad news because he had had dysentery in India earlier in the year.

"Do you feel well enough to make the trip?" I asked.

"I am going tonight whatever I feel like".

"It's not worth taking any unnecessary risks, Mike".

"I don't think there is much risk. My temperature is normal".

"Have you told Freddie?"

"Not yet, and I won't unless I have to".

Mike was pleased to have the responsibility of navigating the canoes in and out of the beach, and for my part I felt every confidence in his ability to do it successfully. It might be thought that the task of paddling one and a half miles to shore and returning to an ML was simple. On a dark night, without lights and with currents of unknown direction and strength sweeping the canoe off its course, it is simple to make an error and an error might mean death or capture. As dusk fell, the MLs veered towards the entrance to Combermere Bay. Familiar with the coastal silhouette after the previous sortie, Freddie navigated the two ships to the anchoring position with time to spare. ML 829's anchor dropped into the sea with a rattling of chains that we thought would wake everyone on the nearby coast. Bartholomew began manoeuvring ML 382 alongside. We sat and waited.

"I took my temperature a little while ago and it was 100", Mike whispered in my ear. "Are you going then?" I asked in astonishment.

"Of course I'm going. I wouldn't miss tonight for anything".

The canoes were lowered and soon "Dusky Maiden" and "Jenny Wren" were in V formation behind Mike's guiding "Putnoe". The sea was flat calm, and in half an hour we were paddling inside the small bay of Ondaw. Within a quarter of a mile of the beach Mike held up his paddle and we went alongside.

"We're nearly there", he said. "It is just after half past nine and we don't have to be back in the canoes until 1 o'clock. I will take the canoes in closer, then you can swim ashore and I will take the canoes out and anchor them before I swim myself".

There was nothing more to be said. The landmarks were all plainly visible and we were all ready to go. Mike led the way and we paddled after him to within two hundred yards of the beach. He raised his paddle as a signal to stop.

The water felt rather pleasant after the exertion of the paddle. Gascoigne, with the Sten gun over his shoulders, dropped into the water. I waited for him to find his bearings and then started swimming for the shore. There was a little surf on the beach but, compared to the rollers of Onchaung, it was nothing. The water was smooth and phosphorescent bubbles fell from my hands as if I were casting handfuls of glowworms into the water.

I slowed down my strokes and took care to keep my hands deep in the water. Gascoigne was close behind me, his beard breaking the water and the barrel of the Sten gun sticking up above his head like the horn of a unicorn. Geoff passed me with a series of powerful strokes that left a glittering wake behind him. In front were the shiny black shapes of the rocky spit, and beyond them the jungle, which fringed the shore. In the village to the left a light was flickering, but on the right the darkness was unbroken.

I grasped a rock and started to pull myself shorewards with my body half in and half out of the water. The swirling currents amongst the rocks were surprisingly strong for a sheltered bay. The smooth rocks were slippery except where the barnacles made the surface sharp and rough. I decided to leave the water and, crawling ashore, I lay motionless in the friendly shadows cast by the jumble of

rocks that lay beyond the reach of the flooding tide. I heard Gascoigne behind me, but I did not turn my head to look at him. The noise of the breaking waves made it difficult to hear any other sound. Twenty yards in front was the path that crossed the root of the rocky spit and connected the two halves of the beach. The jungle beyond looked impenetrable; I wondered what lay behind its inscrutable curtain. I turned my head slowly towards Gascoigne. "I'm going into the jungle ahead. You wait here and cover me, then follow in a few seconds".

He shook his wet beard. I crawled forward from rock to rock. I was soon in the shelter of the black foliage, and turned to look across the beach and out to sea. Gascoigne detached his shadowy shape from the clinging background of dark rocks and glided across the few yards of ground that lay between us. He sat down with his legs apart in the attitude of a tired man who intends to enjoy his picnic lunch. The Sten gun lay across his knees and he started to clean it. The heavy bolt rattled and scraped across the light metal casing. I felt as outraged as a churchwarden who has discovered a small boy eating potato crisps from a crackling paper bag. I put my mouth to his ear and whispered hoarsely "Get the gun working, but be as quiet as you can. I want to do the left-hand beach first". His guttural acknowledgement told me that he was one of those unfortunate people who cannot whisper. From then on I reduced my communications to the minimum. I looked at my watch; it was after ten o'clock. I moved off amongst the trees while Gascoigne waited in the shadows and covered me with the Sten. When I stopped, he moved forward to join me. At intervals, I crawled onto the sandy beach to estimate the bearing capacity and also to measure the distance from the water line to the back of the beach.

The naval officers ran their lines of soundings to the water's edge. But as the depth of water depended on the state of the tide, it was essential to know the distance from the water line to the high water mark. I preferred to measure this myself rather than risk shooting my friends accidentally. It was safer to know that any human I saw on land was not a friend. Some distance from the rocky spit we found that vehicles would be able to drive from the beach through the jungle fringe and onto the hard surface of a dry paddy field. The Commando Brigade would bring heavy anti-aircraft guns with them but a special roadway would have to be laid across the beach to enable them to negotiate the sand. Further on we found the track leading to the village. It was wide enough for a jeep and the surface was firm. Suddenly, I saw a light approaching from behind us. We moved into the jungle and, crouching in the bushes, waited for the bearer of the light to pass. As it drew nearer, we heard voices and wondered whether they were speaking Japanese. At last the figures came to the stretch of path that we were watching; there were four men dressed in white lungis and one was carrying a lantern. We waited until the beams cast by the swinging lantern were eclipsed by a tum in the jungle track, and then crept forward along the curving boundary of the beach. There were no fishing boats anywhere near the beach which was strange because some of the fishermen I had seen from the Beaufighter must have come from Ondaw. Perhaps the fishermen carried their craft up to their huts at the end of the day's work.

I looked at my watch; it was quarter to twelve already. We worked back to the rocky spit and started to reconnoitre the other half of the beach. From the air photographs, I remembered that within a few yards of the rocky spit the track leading to Onchaung turned inland. The huts behind the right half of the beach

were served by a branch track. I did not intend to invite discovery by approaching too close to the village. Slowly, we threaded our way through the thin jungle that bordered the track. The track was narrow and rocks, which projected out of the ground on all sides, would make the task of widening it difficult. Through the trees, we caught occasional glimpses of light or fire in the village. I decided that I had seen enough.

Obviously there were no defences on the beach, and if there were any Japanese troops in the neighbourhood they must have gone to bed very early. We reached the rocky spit without incident and I felt happy as the cool water lapped over me. It had been a good night. There was plenty of information on my underwater writing tablets and much that would encourage the planners of the Commando Brigade. Ondaw had made up for the deficiencies and difficulties of Onchaung; a successful night had followed our failure in the surf.

Cumberland answered the call of my torch as quickly as Aladdin's genie. Gascoigne climbed nimbly aboard and when I had settled in behind him we paddled out to the other canoes. The three canoes lay side by side with their bows pointing to the shore.

"Did you see anything interesting from out here, Cumberland?" I asked.

Nothing much, Sir. Just a few lights from the village over yonder", he replied, pointing in the direction of the village behind the right hand beach.

"There's a swimmer's light", said Neil and prepared to push off. Cumberland had dropped his anchor after we had returned from the beach and Neil had weighed his in order to be ready to answer Geoff's or Mike's summons without delay. He paddled into the darkness in the direction of the faint blue light, which was signalling the letter "N". We peered intently into the night until the silhouette of the canoe floated out of the dark background of the shoreline. Geoff was the passenger. He dropped into the water and swam over to his own canoe.

"How did it go, Geoff?" I asked.

"It was as easy as falling off a log. I had no trouble taking the lines of soundings and saw only one gang of natives".

"It's nearly one o'clock now. I don't suppose that Mike will be much longer. We certainly could not complain of shortage of time tonight".

The minutes dragged by. Each one harboured his own unspoken fears. Mike was supposed to be back in his canoe by one o'clock. It was now a quarter past and there was still no sign. Geoff leaned over to me.

"He would have had heaps of time to do his lines of soundings by now", he said.

"I agree".

"It was easy work tonight. I think we ought to start looking for him now".

In the sortie schedule, there was a time at which the canoes would start searching for a missing swimmer. Tonight the time was 1.45 but it was so obvious that something was wrong that it seemed wise to start searching at once. Normally we would have waited as the swimmer might have been delayed by an inquisitive sentry or an unserviceable torch, but we could think of nothing tonight except Mike's sickness.

I climbed into Neil's canoe and while Cumberland and Gascoigne stayed at anchor in "Jenny Wren" the other two canoes paddled for the shore. We ran aground on the sand of the right hand beach where the surf was least. Duffy stood guard over the two canoes with his Sten gun and Geoff, Neil and I started wading amongst the rocks of the spit. We thought that if Mike had fainted in the

water, his body would have been washed onto the beach. Revolver in hand, I waded along the beach to the right. A dog started barking in the huts at the back of the beach. There was nothing in the water so I turned back. The search of the other side of the spit was equally fruitless. It was ten to two, and we had to be back in the MLs by three o'clock or we should all be left behind.

We paddled out into the bay, and while Cumberland hauled in his anchor Geoff set the course on his steering compass. He started off with rapid strokes and the remaining canoes fell in behind him. Neil was a good paddler and our bow wave became quite noticeable. Ahead the high coastline of the Burmese mainland lay black and forbidding. It was nearly quarter to three before Geoff gave the order to stop paddling.

Neil started to transmit infra-red signals on the bearing of the anchored MLs. I scanned the horizon with the infra-red receiver in an attempt to pick up the ML's transmissions. Geoff pulled out a pair of powerful night binoculars and started searching the water ahead. The sea was calm and the black coastline looked more sinister than ever. There was no answering signal and as the hands of our luminous watches drew close to three o'clock we had to make a final plan of action. At three o'clock the MLs had to withdraw in order to be clear of the enemy coast by dawn. We could remain in our present position for another hour and then we should have to paddle for some unfrequented part of the coast and lie up until the next night.

"Well, I suggest that we show a torch", said Geoff.

"And while we are at it we might shine it right round the horizon", said someone else. Everyone was full of ideas for our salvation. Geoff switched on his torch and holding it above his head pointed it at every point of the compass in turn. The dark mainland glowered back unresponsively and then the natives of Ondaw were given an opportunity of seeing a ghostly light on the sea.

"Ssh!" said Cumberland, imperiously. "I thought I heard the motors starting up". We listened as we were bidden, but that was only the first of a number of occasions when the MLs were heard starting their engines. I had often wondered what it would be like to be left behind, but I had never expected to have company in the adventure. Now that it had happened, it did not seem so bad. There were plenty of places in which we could hide ourselves and the canoes for the day. It would not be too difficult to contact the MLs when they returned the next night. It was quarter past three.

"Let's give them another half hour and then paddle over to the mangroves beyond Ondaw", suggested Geoff.

"Listen!" said Neil. "I can hear the engines now".

We listened. The distant surf could just be heard but all the other noises were made by the canoes and their crews.

"How many water bottles have we got?" I asked.

No one answered. Geoff continued to scan the horizon.

"Ssh! I can hear the MLs", said Duffy.

Twelve ears were tuned to pick up the slightest sound. Sure enough, this time the engines could be heard and they were coming from behind us, from the direction of Ondaw. Glasses were trained on the coastline we had left an hour before. The muffled throb grew louder and then we could see without glasses. They approached us slowly in line astern. Every gun was pointing at us, and it was not a happy welcome home to find the long barrel of the Bofors depressed to cover

us. Friendly signals were exchanged and the canoes taken on board in record time. ML 829 swung towards the entrance to Combermere Bay and with an open throttle started struggling to make up the half-hour of darkness that had been lost.

Freddie was very upset. He had spent long hours peering through the night glasses and many anxious minutes worrying about the safety of his entire party. Then, when all seemed lost, our torch flashes had been seen to seaward and hope had been revived; but at the moment of relief he had learned of the loss of Mike. Geoff, Freddie and I gathered in the wardroom to discuss the sombre subject.

"I know he had a temperature when he started", I said.

"Had a temperature?" queried Freddie. "But I took it myself this afternoon and it was normal".

"He took it again in the evening and it was 100".

"Then why didn't he tell me?" Freddie asked in astonishment.

"He had made up his mind to go and he thought that you might stop him if you knew he had a temperature", I told him.

"Well, I suppose that it is not much good crying over that now. Tell me exactly what happened tonight". Geoff and I told the story as far as we knew it. Geoff then said "I feel pretty sure that Mike was not alive when we left Ondaw Bay".

I agreed with Geoff's opinion. If Mike had fainted in the water, he would have drowned although his suit would have kept his body afloat. His job did not entail leaving the water so that it was most unlikely that he had been killed by Japs or natives. Anyway, if there had been trouble Gascoigne and I would have heard it. If he had lost his footing amongst the rocks, and been knocked unconscious, the result would have been the same as if he had fainted. If a fish had attacked him, we should have heard the screams and if we had not he would be dead.

Our difficulty in finding the MLs had been caused by our vigorous paddling and the ebb tide at our backs. In three-quarters of an hour of paddling, we had passed the MLs without seeing them. While they had been gazing shorewards, we were further out to sea than they were and scanning the water to seaward.

The MLs anchored at Teknaf at 1.30 in the afternoon of 19th October. By that time, Freddie had collected all the information he could on the operation and the circumstances of Mike's loss and had decided that we would not return to Ondaw to make another search for the body. It was the normal "drill" to return the next night, but in this case the search had been so thorough that it seemed pointless to repeat it. It was an unpleasant afternoon. The ratings checked the equipment for the next sortie to Elizabeth Island, and an intelligence officer from the Commando Brigade came on board to get early details of the Ondaw beaches. We sat round the wardroom table discussing the information that we had been able to obtain and the plans for the next sortie to the chaung area east of Ondaw. Then Williams came in wearing a long face.

"I'm afraid they haven't sent any lubricating oil with the last consignment of aviation spirit." he said. "Until I get some more it will be impossible to steam another yard". Freddie's face dropped.

"How long will it take you to get some?" he asked.

It was a grim prospect. Even if it had been decided to visit Ondaw again, in the hope that Mike could be located, we should have been unable to execute our plan. The next sortie would have to be postponed and valuable moonless nights

lost. Operation David, which had looked so promising, seemed to have gone awry. In the evening, the final blow fell. A signal was received that ordered the cancellation of the operation. Our disappointment was bitter and the laconic signal left all the reasons to be imagined. It was an unhappy party on the ML that turned to thinking out possible solutions to the puzzle. Freddie was the first to voice an idea.

"Perhaps they feel that the loss of Mike has compromised the whole plan and have decided not to risk failure by landing where the enemy expects us".

"They've probably decided to send the Commando Brigade to another place a thousand miles away", I suggested sarcastically. But we all felt that Freddie had hit on the real reason and if that was so the party must consider itself a disgrace. The next day, the little jetty of Teknaf was dotted with soldiers wearing green berets. LCIs had been unloading the Commando Brigade who were going into camp near the river. On the hills beyond Maungdaw, an occasional shell burst in a puff of grey smoke. The activity on all sides accentuated our feeling of helpless immobility. Colonel Young, the Deputy Commander of the Brigade, came on board during the morning and spoke to us. He was twenty-nine years old but his face and his tendency to stoutness made him appear older. His record in the Commandos was the envy of every soldier. In the years when the majority of the British Army was engaged in home defence, Colonel Young had fought in the Channel Islands, Lofoten and Vaagso and Dieppe not to mention many small-scale raids. Later, when the time had arrived for an offensive, he had taken part in the campaigns in Sicily, Italy and North-West Europe.

Once again, Freddie laid out the chart, maps and air photographs on the wardroom table. Colonel Young explained briefly why further reconnaissance of the island had been stopped. And his words comforted us and dispelled our sense of guilt. He seemed most interested in our report, and questioned me on the lookout post at Onchaung.

"What made you think that it was something other than an ordinary fisherman's hut?" he asked. His pale blue eyes fixed on mine and I felt I was on trial. I tried to get my thoughts in order.

"First, Sir, the hut must have been camouflaged because it does not appear on the air photos. Second, its position covers both beaches and is in the best position for concealment. Third, the light was on late at night when there was no light in the village of Onchaung; and last, the mosquito nets".

Colonel Young seemed satisfied and, after congratulating us on what we had achieved, he left.

Two days later, having received the lubricating oil, we sailed and arrived at Chittagong early on 23rd October. Freddie and I spent the afternoon on the solemn task of packing and listing Mike's kit. Then for three days we worked on the report of the operation. Maps had to be carefully drawn on tracing paper and the report had to be written, typed on Roneo "skins" and run off. Duffy, the draughtsman, and I spent long and backbreaking hours over the drawing boards. In the evenings, we entertained or were entertained by the coastal force officers who had looked after us so well at sea. Then, on 27th October, a signal arrived at our temporary office in Naval HQ, requesting us to send "two" to accompany a raid on Elizabeth Island. As Freddie read the signal, a smile spread across his face. There was no doubt in his mind who the two were going to be.

"We're going on a raid, Alec. They hope to get some information about Mike". Freddie was delighted at the prospect of taking some offensive action against the Japanese. In the course of his naval career, he had seen a lot of fighting. He commanded a small Dutch coasting vessel in the evacuation of Dunkirk, and afterwards two of the ships he served in, Cairo and Cossack, were sunk. The history of the party, a list of cancelled operations, had been very disappointing to him. Now, at last, we were going to take part in an offensive raid.

ML 474 sailed at 7 am the next day and by six o'clock in the evening Freddie and I were unloading our rucksacks onto the jetty at Teknaf. The Commando Brigade was quartered in basha huts that had been specially constructed for them by native labour. Colonel Young was in command, as Brigadier Nonweiler was in hospital. His brigade consisted of two Army commandos, No. 1 and No. 5 and two Royal Marines commandos, No. 42 and No. 44. We discovered that the raiding force was to be drawn from No. 42.

On 29th October we were introduced to the officers who were going to take part in the raid. Major Jock Cunningham was to be the commander with Major Michael Davies and Captain Hartley Dales being in charge of their own men. The thirty men required for the operation had been drawn from different sub-units of the commando in order to spread the experience gained from the raid throughout the unit. The plan was explained to us. The party would land at Ondaw, thereby avoiding the heavy surf at Onchaung, and march two and a half miles across the island to Onchaung. It was hoped that it would be possible to creep up to the lookout post and take a prisoner. In addition to the primary object of taking a Japanese prisoner, the raiding party would take interpreters and question the natives for news of Mike Peacock. There were four days in which to practise the troops in the various stages of the operation and so ensure that each man would know exactly what he had to do.

"You say that the light was on in the hut?" Cunningham asked me.

"Yes", I replied.

"I think that we had better throw a grenade in at the door and then dash in after it while the occupants are still dazed".

If you use an ordinary Mills grenade, you might find that they are all dead", I said.

"What do you suggest?"

"I think that it would be better to use a quarter pound stick of gelignite. The people inside the hut would be dazed by the explosion but there would be no splinters to kill a valuable prisoner".

It was agreed that I should crawl close to the open door of the hut and throw in the gelignite. Immediately after the explosion, three men would rush into the hut and light the plug this had to be struck against a matchbox. The number of failures made it imperative to employ a different method of ignition. A corporal who was expert in handling explosives agreed to make a number of plugs with percussion igniters for trial on the next day.

The following morning, before starting on the practice landings from an LCP, half a dozen of us assembled to try out the new charges. The corporal demonstrated his own handiwork. Holding the plug of gelignite in his right hand, he pulled a small pin that fired a cap and so lit a short length of fuse. He flung the plug into a gully and an explosion followed almost immediately. I took a plug, pulled the pin and hurled it away. The new method seemed quite satisfactory, and was

quite waterproof. I bent down to pick up another plug. I heard someone say to Cunningham

"If anything happens to him on the night, someone else will have to throw the charge".

"I quite agree", Cunningham replied. "We ought to throw one or two for luck". He picked up a plug and inspected it. Then he moved back his arm in readiness for throwing and pulled the pin. There was an immediate explosion. Cunningham was blown off his balance and as he fell I saw him gazing intently at the ragged stump of his right forearm.

"Oh Christ!" he said as he hit the ground.

The instinct of self-preservation and the noise of the explosion had made every spectator of the tragedy take half a dozen running steps from the scene. Fortunately, the commando's medical officer, Captain Freddy Rodger RAMC, had been one of the party. In a flash he had returned to Cunningham's side and applied a tourniquet.

I went with an officer of the commando to report the accident to Colonel Young. When we arrived, he was sitting behind his desk in his basha office. He looked up and listened to an agitated flow of words for a few seconds before he interrupted. In a light the plug this had to be struck against a matchbox. The number of failures made it imperative to employ a different method of ignition. A corporal who was expert in handling explosives agreed to make a number of plugs with percussion igniters for trial on the next day.

The following morning, before starting on the practice landings from an LCP, half a dozen of us assembled to try out the new charges. The corporal demonstrated his own handiwork. Holding the plug of gelignite in his right hand, he pulled a small pin that fired a cap and so lit a short length of fuse. He flung the plug into a gully and an explosion followed almost immediately. I took a plug, pulled the pin and hurled it away. The new method seemed quite satisfactory, and was quite waterproof. I bent down to pick up another plug. I heard someone say to Cunningham

"If anything happens to him on the night, someone else will have to throw the charge".

"I quite agree", Cunningham replied. "We ought to throw one or two for luck". He picked up a plug and inspected it. Then he moved back his arm in readiness for throwing and pulled the pin. There was an immediate explosion. Cunningham was blown off his balance and as he fell I saw him gazing intently at the ragged stump of his right forearm.

"Oh Christ!" he said as he hit the ground.

The instinct of self-preservation and the noise of the explosion had made every spectator of the tragedy take half a dozen running steps from the scene. Fortunately, the commando's medical officer, Captain Freddy Rodger RAMC, had been one of the party. In a flash he had returned to Cunningham's side and applied a tourniquet.

I went with an officer of the commando to report the accident to Colonel Young. When we arrived, he was sitting behind his desk in his basha office. He looked up and listened to an agitated flow of words for a few seconds before he interrupted. In a quiet voice he asked a series of questions. His calmness and directness were like a sedative to our shocked nerves.

"When did it happen? Where did it happen? Where is he now and who is looking after him?"

Satisfied about the bare details, Colonel Young got up and went to the scene of the accident. There was never any question of postponing the operation and Major Davies became the commander of the raiding force.

On Thursday morning, Freddie was kept very busy. Commander Nichol, who had the title of Naval Assault Force Commander, Arakan, arrived at the jetty and sent for Freddie. NAFCA, as he was called, had heard of the forthcoming raid and he did not approve of it. Freddie, as the senior naval officer concerned with the execution of the raid, was told that the LCP could not be used. For practical purposes, this was equivalent to cancelling the operation without reference to the Commando Brigade. It was a difficult situation for Freddie, and he drove back to camp to consult with Colonel Young. During the next few hours, NAFCA and Colonel Young discussed the matter from every point of view without using any euphemisms. If the discussion was acrimonious, at least the result was satisfactory as NAFCA agreed that the LCP that had been used for training should be allowed to carry out the raid.

Just before lunch, we were told to form up outside Brigade HQ for inspection by Lieutenant General Sir Philip Christison, the Commander of XV Indian Corps. When Freddie and I arrived, we found the officers of "A" Group of the SBS already waiting. Harry Holden-White was supported by Captain Barnes, Captain Livingstone and Lieutenant Sherwood. The Corps Commander walked down the line shaking hands with each one of us in turn. Afterwards, we heard that he had offered to lend Colonel Young his own LCP if one could not be obtained from any other source.

In the evening, Freddie and I moved over to the quarters of No. 42 Commando. My bed was laid out on the floor of the CO's basha and Freddie's in Major Davies's basha. We received every hospitality and kindness, and if it had not been for the early start next morning, the party might well have continued until the early morning.

At 7 am next morning, we boarded the MLs that were lying gunwale to gunwale alongside the small jetty. Lieutenant Milne, the senior officer of the 49th South African Flotilla, was in ML 380 and Vic Bartholomew, who had supported us in Operation David, was in ML 382. The soldiers stepped on board and walked to the bows of the ship to which they had been allotted. Rucksacks and weapons lay piled on the deck as the men stood in groups and smoked in the early morning sunshine.

Amongst the barrels lying on the jetty, a few Indians sat watching our departure. The LCP lying astern of ML 382 and attached by a towrope must have made the nature of the operation clear to any interested person. Perhaps, in a small hut inland, one of them had a wireless to communicate the news to the Japanese; their eyes appeared to search purposefully over the MLs and amongst the commandos on their decks. I wished that the MLs would cast off and sail out of range of curious eyes.

The voyage down the coast passed happily. Freddie was on board ML 380 with Colonel Young, Major Drysdale and Major Davies. In ML 382 I travelled with Captain Dales, Lieutenant Cotton, the intelligence officer, and Captain Rodger, the doctor. Astern rode the LCP, its blunt nose pushed upwards by the pull of the

towing cable until it rose like the bow of a speedboat. Behind the windshield I could see the helmsman turning the wheel on one side and then the other as he endeavoured to keep his swinging craft in the middle of the ML's wake. The doctor started playing his bagpipes and Lieutenant Cotton laid out his air photographs on the roof of the charthouse so that men might see what the island looked like.

To the skirl of the pipes, the men pored over the photographs. The nameless beach on which they had made so many landings; the formless dark countryside and even the basha with the lighted doorway had seemed as unreal to them as the shapes and shadows that linger after a dream. Their imaginations, which had so long been living on the emptiness of hint and rumour, ravenously devoured the solid food of fact. They applied the drills they had learnt at Teknaf to the country of the air photographs; as the trees and hills leapt up to meet each pair of eyes that peered through the stereoscope there were cries and exclamations. Dales and Cotton sat in the sun answering questions, pointing out features on maps and photographs and chatting; the enthusiastic soldiers crowded round the officers like thirsty men round a barrel of iced beer.

As darkness fell, we swung eastwards in the now familiar turn into Combermere Bay. When the evening meal was over, Captain Rodger, the commando's medical officer, started turning the wardroom into an operating theatre. The sight of the white cloths and the cases of shining surgical instruments reminded me of the grimness of the night's work. In the bright sunshine, the skirl of the bagpipes, the splash of the foaming sea and the laughter of the men had combined to cloak the realities in gay dress. In the darkness, the muttering voices sounding above the hiss of the oily black water showed that the others were also aware of the change.

Freddie navigated the MLs to the position off Ondaw beach and the anchors dropped into the water. No time was to be wasted in allowing the MLs to tie up alongside each other. The LCP cast off the towing rope and came alongside our ladder. We jumped onto the deck and then descended into the small hold under the canvas canopy. The sea was smooth and the LCP glided through the water to the ladder of ML 380. The rest of the force clambered into the small boat and then we pushed off and headed for the shore.

Freddie was crouching on the forepeak, just in front of the helmsman. In his hand he held a compass and the frequent orders he gave about the course to be steered showed that he was the pilot for the night. Davies was lying on the starboard side of the forepeak and behind him and Freddie, on the narrow deck surrounding the hold, were the men who would land first. Under the canopy, the rest of us stood close together in the confined space. The helmsman grasped the car-like wheel and stared at the compass in front of him. The black coastline of Ondaw bay appeared to starboard and it suddenly seemed to me that this was a strange way to be entering enemy waters by comparison to our usual clandestine methods. The engine reduced speed and above its even beat I could hear the sound of the surf breaking on the shore. The kedge was dropped from the stern, and the next moment the bows ran onto the beach with the soft sigh which every man had been waiting for a week to hear.

Davies landed with a splash in a few inches of water, and raced across the twenty yards of sandy beach to the palm and jungle that fringed its landward side. The men jumped off the landing craft one after the other in two lines like ropes being

uncoiled from a locker. When my turn came, I saw that Freddie had brought us within a few yards of the rocky spit, the exact spot that had been chosen for the landing. I found Davies and we moved off behind the leading commandos on the path which crossed the root of the rocky spit. The men moved along the edge of the beach and it was some time before they had satisfied themselves that there were no enemy in the village. Unfortunately, they did not encircle the village quickly enough and a number of shadowy figures, which we saw flitting amongst the huts, escaped inland.

The huts were built on three-foot high supports and had the appearance of being on stilts. In one of these there was an old woman and Davies decided to interrogate her in the hope of finding out where the Japs were. The interpreters were brought forward and the work began. It had not been possible to find a man who could speak both Arakanese and English and as a result we had two interpreters; one spoke Burmese and English and the other Arakanese and Burmese. Thus, in order to find out anything from the simple Arakanese fisherfolk we had to pass our question to the Burmese interpreter who in turn translated the question for the Arakanese interpreter who in turn put the question to the villager. The process was long and tedious.

"Ask her where the Japs are", said Davies.

The answer came back a few minutes later that there were no Japs on the island. "Ask her where the nearest Japs are then".

While the Arakanese interpreter was speaking to the old woman, she waved her hand in the direction of the mainland, and like an echo the answer came back that the nearest Japs were on the mainland. I did not like the sound of this; if there were no Japs on the island, who were the people I had seen in the hut at Onchaung?

"Ask her if there is anyone who will guide us to Onchaung".

The interpreters chatted in their own tongues and eventually the question was put to the woman. She immediately became very agitated and we were impatient to hear what her answer was. The little Burmese interpreter, who had been on other raids on the coast, explained the woman's words.

"She says it is not good to go to Onchaung because there are Japanese soldiers there". Davies groaned.

"Just a minute ago, she said there were no Japs on the island. Ask her how many there are at Onchaung".

One interpreter is bad enough but two are almost impossible. The talk went on. The yellow-looking Arakanese chatted to the old woman and probably discussed his various friends and relations with her. Every now and then, he supplied us with some information to keep us contented. It appeared that the old woman had only recently come from Akyab and so she did not know very much about the Japs on Elizabeth Island.

Two fishermen were brought in by the commandos, and placed beside the old woman for interrogation. The Arakanese seemed to be enjoying his gossip. There were about eight Japanese soldiers at Onchaung and many more at Kyunthaya. Nothing was known of a British naval lieutenant being drowned or captured. This was disappointing news. By the time the interrogation was finished, we had been on shore for over an hour. Davies conferred with Colonel Young and Major Drysdale and between them they decided that the whole force would march to Onchaung instead of the twenty men it had been planned to use. Colonel Young

and Drysdale would stay behind on Ondaw beach and keep watch. Freddie stayed with the base party, which numbered about six all ranks. The LCP officer, Lieutenant Lang, anchored his craft four hundred yards from the beach so as to prevent its destruction by a Jap patrol. The two men who had been interrogated agreed, under pressure, to guide us to Onchaung and at last we set off.

Three commandos led the way along the track and the guides, interpreters, Davies and myself followed. The track climbed upwards from the village through a tunnel of dark and shadowy jungle. In a few yards, we came to the limit of my previous reconnaissance and the country, from that point to Onchaung beach, was as new to me as to anyone else in the raiding force.

The jungle came to an end and the path led into flat paddy fields. The guides stopped in the middle of the path and began talking together. The interpreters joined in the discussion and when the leading soldiers realised that no one was following them, they came back to discover the reason for the halt. The group stood in the open paddy field and chatted together.

"What's the trouble?" asked Davies.

The Burmese interpreter put the question to the Arakanese interpreter, but by the time he was ready to translate it the two guides had begun to move forward again. This arbitrary halt proved to be the first of many. What caused them I never discovered but I felt certain that a well placed boot would have greatly reduced their frequency. We advanced like a caterpillar, one part of the column always being stationary. As we approached Onchaung, the guides left the track so that we would skirt the village and strike the far end of the eastern beach.

Suddenly someone shouted

"Look out right".

I heard the sound of running feet and saw a number of black shapes rushing towards the column from the direction of Onchaung. Many a heart must have missed a beat before its owner realised that the column was being assaulted by a herd of wild pigs. The pigs had probably been rooting at the outskirts of the village, and had panicked when their line of retreat to the jungle was cut off by a long line of men. I think that the pigs did us a good tum by putting the commandos on their toes. Two hours on enemy territory without seeing a Jap, combined with the many halts and delays, had made the men weary and over-confident.

I saw some water ahead, and the leading men waded into it until their knees were covered. It was a small pool and beyond lay the beach. The surf was roaring into Onchaung and I felt glad that a landing had not been attempted on this side of the island. The water in the pool was not very deep and the bottom was of firm sand. The leading men had halted on the edge of the beach and I went forward with Davies.

I could see the full length of the beach as it swept in a gentle curve towards the knoll jutting out into the sea. Although I had landed with Cumberland on the western beach, I found no difficulty in recognising the landmarks from our position at the end of the eastern beach. The jungle at the back of the beach was much thicker than at Ondaw, and made a silent and secret approach to the hut impossible .. It looked as though our approach would have to be made across the strip of sand that separated the dense jungle from the roaring surf of the bay.

Davies leaned towards me and whispered

"Where's the hut?"

""At the base of the knoll on the shoreward side", I told him and pointed. At the far end of the beach we could see the jungle fringe curve seawards to meet the steep-sided knoll like a slender neck joining a large skull.

"There don't seem to be any lights tonight", Davies said.

Hartley Dales came up and we three discussed the next move. I did not like the look of the unbroken darkness in front. Probably some of the natives, who escaped into the jungle from Ondaw, before the commandos had surrounded the village, had warned the Japs of our landing. Davies decided to advance along the back of the beach and rely for cover on the shadows cast on the sand by the jungle foliage. Hartley Dales moved behind the leading commandos and Davies and I followed. As we crept along in the gently swaying shadows, I pushed up the safety catch of my Colt automatic. My only other weapon was the Mills grenade that was to be thrown through the door of the hut. After Major Cunningham's accident, the Mills grenade had returned to favour.

The knoll was about a hundred yards away when the firing started. It was difficult to judge where the fire was coming from, as the gun flashes were difficult to see. A light machine gun was one of the weapons in use, and the promptness with which its gunner had opened fire showed that the Japs had been waiting for us. The commandos in front opened fire with their Garand rifles, and the Japs started to yell at the tops of their voices.

It was a strange action. The commandos were strung out in single file and the Japs were in the jungle of the narrow neck of land joining the knoll to the mainland. Nelson's tactic of crossing the enemy "T" had been repeated, but it was the Japs who were in the favourable position. The jungle on our right was too thick to allow an outflanking movement, and the open beach would be a suicidal line of advance. The jungle was not a comforting flank guard for it might contain hidden paths that would enable the Japs to approach unobserved.

Suddenly, a Jap leapt out of the jungle in front and raced across the beach towards the knoll. Sergeant Lucas fired a long burst with his Tommy gun and the Jap collapsed on the sand with fearful shrieks and moans. With an effort, he regained his feet and staggered down the beach towards the water. By this time, a Bren gunner was standing up and firing his gun from the hip. I could see the bursts striking the beach and the dark path of disturbed sand, moving inexorably like an ink line being traced on blotting paper. When the burst overtook the stricken Jap, the sand ceased to be disturbed and the horrible cries died away. The body lay by the water's edge, but beyond the reach of the advancing and retreating tongues of foam. Davies tugged at my shirt. It was time to start the journey back if we were to keep to the time schedule and allow the MLs sufficient time to clear the coast before daylight. The object of the expedition had been to capture a prisoner, and finding out news of Mike had been of secondary importance. It was obvious that the Japs were thoroughly awake, and the chances of succeeding in the main part of the plan were therefore very poor. Our formation of single file was not at all suitable for launching an attack and even if it had been we would have had to cross a wide stretch of open ground to attack the enemy in an unknown jungle position.

As Wellington said after the Battle of Seringapatam, "I have come to the determination never to suffer an attack to be made by night upon an enemy who was prepared and strongly posted and whose posts had not been reconnoitred in

daylight". Davies gave the order to retire, and I feel sure that his decision was right.

At the pool of water, Hartley Dales checked his men as they passed and found that he had not lost a man. We moved quickly to prevent the Japs from cutting across country and ambushing us on the track to Ondaw. When we reached the back of Onchaung, we saw the villagers streaming out into the countryside in an effort to escape the scene of battle. The return journey over the paddy fields contrasted with the halting progress behind the two guides. The commandos were thoroughly alert and knew the route. We covered the two and a half miles to Ondaw in three-quarters of an hour and found the base party waiting. A Jap had walked along their beach and when challenged had made his escape before he could be taken.

Freddie signalled the LCP and in a few minutes it was nosing through the surf to the beach. The surf was heavier than when we landed, and caused difficulty in embarkation. Half the force had climbed on board when a large wave almost forced the craft broadside onto the beach. Lieutenant Lang ordered the helmsman to go astern and come in to the beach again. The engine raced as it drove the craft seawards and the waves broke over the square stem. Then, with a cough and a splutter, the engine died. The four-inch manila rope that secured the kedge had become entangled with the screw. The landing craft was helpless just outside the breaking waves and half the force was marooned on shore with an unknown number of angry Japs in the vicinity. Fortunately, the LCP was equipped with large roughly made paddles for just such an emergency and four of these were quickly manned by the soldiers on board. They paddled hard for a few minutes and then Lieutenant Lang, armed with a hacksaw and stripped of his clothes, dived over the side to commence cutting the rope that held the screw. He disappeared for a few seconds and then broke surface to take a gasping breath before diving again. The landing craft was drifting and the distance to the shore must have been three hundred yards. The soldiers rested on their paddles and spoke in undertones as they might have done at a funeral.

From the direction of the beach, a torch began winking in morse.

"C-o-m-e-a-n-d-f-e-t-c-h-u-s-w-h-a-t-i-s-d-e-l-a-y-i-n-g-y-o-u"

The message went unanswered because it seemed stupid to announce our misfortunes to any Jap who might be watching. Freddie was leaning over the stern and talking to Lang during his brief rests above water.

"What is it like down there?" he asked.

"There are four turns of rope round the screw and believe me they take some cutting". Lang disappeared underwater. Freddie looked anxiously shoreward. If the Japs had wireless communication between the various posts on the island, they might be able to mount a counterattack within two hours. The torch on the shore continued to wink out its messages. I felt sorry for them being left on the enemy's doorstep without even an explanation. Colonel Young and Major Drysdale were in the stranded party and their loss would be a blow to 3 Commando Brigade. Colonel Young had been keen to sample a landing in Burma and had decided to come on the raid to experience eastern conditions. In the European theatre, he had taken part in twenty-five landings, some of which were major operations. He must have found the evening's entertainment tame by

comparison with the cliffs of Dieppe and would undoubtedly be furious at being left behind on such a small-scale raid.

Lieutenant Lang came up for the twentieth time.

"All clear" he gasped.

He was hauled on board and at the same instant the engine roared into action. The LCP gathered way and headed shoreward. The surf seemed to have grown worse during the half-hour of diving operations and Lang was determined not to risk his craft again. When the keedge was dropped astern, the LCP was held with a few feet of water under the bows and the shore party had to wade out to embark. It was hard work heaving the soldiers on board and towards the end some of them had to swim. The last wet body was dragged over the gunwale and the craft began to move astern. When the keedge had been weighed, the bows swung seaward.

The men were counted again and it was discovered that Corporal Chappell, the Bren gunner, was missing. Colonel Young ordered Lang to proceed to the MLs and unload. The relief of picking up the stranded party gave way to anxiety for the missing corporal. When the raiding force was on board the MLs, the LCP returned to the beach with Lieutenant Cotton, the intelligence officer, to look for Chappell. While the LCP cruised parallel to the beach, Cotton flashed a torch and shouted "Chappell" at the top of his voice. There was no answer, and after fifteen minutes the LCP left the beach to rejoin the MLs.

The doctor was disappointed that his operating theatre had been constructed to no purpose. Freddie and I were disappointed that we had not been able to find out anything about Mike Peacock, and I was bitterly disappointed that the hut had not been found, as I had seen it lighted and unguarded. And now the whole force was disappointed at having left a prisoner behind, when the object of the raid had been to collect one. On the credit side, ten Japs were reported killed in the action at Onchaung, though I think that the correct figure was nearer four.

The force returned to Teknaf without encountering any further difficulties. Before Freddie and I left the Brigade for Chittagong, we were shown much kindness by the officers of HQ and of 42 Commando Royal Marines. Colonel Young seemed quite pleased with the efforts of COPP 8 and told Freddie that he had never before been landed at the exact spot selected by the planners. To me, he offered a job in one of the commandos, but I told him that I intended to return to conventional sapping when COPP 8 was disbanded.

The plan to seize Elizabeth Island and use it as an offensive base was thrown into the incinerator, and the flames severed our ties with the island. Apart from highly coloured stories broadcast by the enemy radio, nothing was heard of Mike until the middle of 1945.

AFTERWORD

I originally wrote this account in 1950 in Leura, Blue Mountains, New South Wales, where I was recovering from pulmonary TB. For my part in Operation David, I was mentioned in despatches, as were most of COPP 8. My Army career post-TB began with the Staff College Camberley in 1952, and I stayed in the Army until 1960. Then followed two years at Tyndale Hall Theological College, Bristol,

ordination in 1962 and twenty-four years in parish ministry until 1986 when I retired.

I hope that the following notes may be of some interest.

XV Indian Corps

Lieutenant General Sir Philip Christison DSO MC and Bar in October 1943 took over command of the Corps from General Slim, who became 14th Army Commander. Early in 1944, the Corps won a considerable victory in the Arakan. The fierce battle of the "Admin Box" was won by holding out against an enveloping Japanese attack and using air supply for the first time. After the battle, Christison was knighted in the field by the Viceroy of India. His Indian soldiers called him "Smiling General Sahib". He retired from the Army in the rank of General in 1949, and died in 1993 at the age of one hundred.

3 Commando Brigade

Colonel Peter Young DSO MC and two Bars was Deputy Commander of the Brigade. In fact, the operation to Elizabeth Island was called "Operation Deputy". At the time, Peter Young was acting Brigade Commander. The following year he was promoted Brigadier and took over command of the Brigade. He retired from the Army in 1959, and was appointed Reader in Military History at RMA Sandhurst. He became well known as a military historian and writer. He died in 1988 at the age of seventy-three and is commemorated in a memorial window in Ripple Church, near Tewkesbury.

Major Douglas Drysdale, the Brigade Major, was commissioned in the Royal Marines in 1933. Later in the War, he commanded 44 Commando Royal Marines in the assault on Malaya. He was appointed MBE and mentioned in despatches for his outstanding leadership. But it was in the Korean War (leading 41 Independent Commando and working with the 1st US Marine Division) that he won much fame and a DSO. He retired in 1962 as a full colonel, and died in 1990 aged seventy-three. He is buried at East Bradenham in Norfolk.

42 Commando Royal Marines

Lieutenant Colonel Halford David Fellowes DSO, the commanding officer, was later wounded in the landing on the Myebon Peninsula. Peter Young was to write in "The Raiders" (Fontana 1989) p.328 "3 Commando Brigade had some brilliant people in it and a very good staff;it was a damned good Brigade. Of the units, I'd rate 42 Commando for steadiness and No. 5 for dash. 42 had a very good CO in David Fellowes, a good friend of mine. I rate him and Campbell Hardy very highly". After the war, he commanded Plymouth Group Royal Marines in the rank of Major General. He died in 1985.

Captain Hartley Dales, a South African who had studied at Cambridge University before the War, as major later took over command of 42 Commando Royal Marines when Lieutenant Colonel Fellowes was wounded. He died in South Africa in 1999.

Captain Freddy Rodger RAMC became an eye specialist after the war and did much work for the World Health Organisation in both Africa and India. For twenty years, he was the eye specialist at Swindon Hospital. He died in 2002.

Corporal Aubrey Chappell MM was eventually captured by the Japanese and became a prisoner-of-war in Rangoon. His citation for the Military Medal, which was written by Brigadier Peter Young, is reproduced in Appendix Two.

Royal Navy

Commander Ron Ashby DSC and Bar RNVR, Senior Officer Arakan Coastal Forces was an illustrious sailor. It was he who advised having four large wooden paddles in case of engine failure in the LCP. His foresight probably saved our lives. He remained in the RNVR until 1948 and then bought a boatyard on the Norfolk Broads, founding a travel firm at the same time. For forty-one years he and his family lived on a converted MTB. He died in Norwich in 1998.

Lieutenant Anthony Ivor Lang RINVR, the boat officer of the LCP who spent half an hour diving to free the screw of his craft, was awarded the DSC.

49th South African Flotilla

Lieutenant Alexander George {"Twix"} Milne DSC SANF{V} the senior officer was in ML 380 for Operation Deputy.

Lieutenant Ronald Williams DSC SANF{V} known as "Bungy" was in ML 829 in Operation David.

Lieutenant Vic Bartholomew SANF{Y} was in ML382 in support for both operations.

COPP8

Lieutenant Freddie Ponsonby RN continued in the Royal Navy and spent three years between 1947 and 1950 at HMS St Vincent at Gosport teaching boys. He enjoyed the work of schoolmastering, and tried to retire from the RN and take up the work as a civilian. The Admiralty said that he was too valuable to release. Freddie was soon at sea again in the Battle Class destroyer, HMS Solebay. His flotilla made an official visit to Setubal, Portugal. Lieutenant Commander Freddie was one of five officers

who were being driven from the harbour by the Naval Attache, Commander A R Cheyne. :saaiy, he ctrove over the ctocks1C1e anct he anct his t1ve passengers were

drowned. This happened on 20th October 1950, six years exactly after Mike Peacock became a prisoner-of-war.

Lieutenant Geoff Richards RNVR was a mature man of about thirty-five. He was a superb swimmer. When he swam in the Colombo swimming pool, people would sit by the side just to watch the symphony in motion. He liked to drive railway engines. He would climb out of the window and along the tops of carriages and persuade the engine driver to let him have a go. Unfortunately, in December 1944, he was killed on the return trip to Ceylon as the train went under a bridge. Lieutenant Mike Peacock RNVR was captured by the Japanese on Elizabeth Island and became a prisoner-of-war in Rangoon. After the war, he practised as a veterinary surgeon in Bedford.

Petty Officer Bob Gascoigne continued in the RN. In 1943 he married Maisie, a WRNS writer, at HMS Hornet. When Bob died in 1995, Maisie asked me to take the cremation service at Ipswich.

A Group Commando SBS

Major Harry Holden-White MC joined the SBS in 1942 from the Royal Sussex Regiment. He took part in the attack on Oran in 1942 and he was armed with a minitorpedo that could be launched from a canoe. He was awarded an MC for his part in the action. At the end of the War, he stayed on in Ceylon as Garrison Adjutant successively at Colombo and Trincomalee, and then as a troop commander in 3 Commando Brigade in Hong Kong. Later, he studied painting at the Chelsea School of Art and in Paris. He died in 1998.

Vessels

HMAS Nizam was one of eight "N" Class destroyers, and one of the four of that class assigned to the RAN. She was built on Clydebank by John Brown, and launched on 4th July 1940. Her main armament consisted of six 4.7-inch guns in twin mountings. After distinguished service in several theatres, she was returned to the RN at the end of 1945 and went into reserve. On 16th November 1955 she arrived at Grays in Essex to be broken up.

Fairmile B Motor Launches were often described as "maids-of-all-work". By the end of the War, over six hundred and fifty had been built worldwide to a standard design. The great majority were constructed here in more than forty different boatyards around the coast. Each took about six months to build. They operated in various roles around the British Isles, in the Mediterranean and the Adriatic and in the Far East. Possibly the most famous action in which they took part, with heavy losses, was Operation Chariot the daring raid on St Nazaire in March 1942. Very few examples have survived.

APPENDIX ONE

The Official History, The War against Japan, Volume II is quoted by Geoffrey Evans in his book "Slim - as a Military Commander" published by Batsford 1969 at page 98 as follows: -

"The surest way of quick success in Burma is not to hammer our way with small forces through jungle where the Japanese have every advantage but to make him occupy as much area as possible, string himself out until he is weak and then, when we have got him stretched, come in at him from the sea and air. By luring him northwards into the Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar districts we get a better chance to get behind his forward troops. His lines of communication run along the coast and are vulnerable throughout their length. It gives us an opportunity of striking anywhere from Teknaf to Moulmein, a long coastline whereon we are almost bound to find an undefended beach. A block by a division landed astride his lines of communication, and kept there, would finally ensure the putting of all the troops northwards in the bag, or at least force them to adopt a difficult getaway through the hills."

APPENDIX TWO

"Mne CHAPPELL was a member of a small patrol of 42 Cdo RM landed on the Jap occupied ELIZABETH ISLAND in the Bay of Bengal with the object of gaining information about a missing Naval Officer and also capturing a prisoner.

They landed at 2200 hours on 4th November and were to be taken off five and three quarter hours later.

On landing the patrol penetrated to the enemy headquarters in the village of Ondaw* approximately four miles away. They were detected and a short engagement ensued during which at least three of the enemy became casualties without loss to the patrol.

During the withdrawal Mne CHAPPELL as Bren gunner was covering the rear, and by mischance became detached. On attempting to rejoin he was ambushed and realising that he was now cut off from the RV he evaded capture by lying up in the jungle. In spite of his narrow escape Mne CHAPPELL had clung to his Bren gun, and his morale being undiminished, he decided to make best use of the day he must now spend on the island. With this in view he made his way to a commanding position from which he quickly realised that the information given the patrol relative to enemy strength on the island was incorrect. Mne CHAPPELL counted 43 Japanese in one party and estimated the total strength at over 100. He also located headquarters and a number of occupied positions. That night he signalled from the RV without result and from then on endured five days of unremitting strain.

The enemy had been disturbed and was now suspicious and alert. Continually Mne CHAPPELL changed his position, often avoiding discovery by a hairbreadth, wet through, hungry and alone. Once whilst snatching a quick sleep he was disturbed by a nearby Japanese patrol obviously searching for him. He opened fire with his Bren gun immediately and used his two grenades at short range but was wounded by a retaliatory Jap grenade. This made him decide to break off the engagement. On doing so he was shot in the left calf at 15 yards range by a Jap whom he promptly killed with his Colt automatic. He then managed to get away successfully.

On taking stock he found that he had but seven rounds left for his Bren and two magazines for the pistol. He had been wounded three times in the left leg (twice by grenade fragments) and once in the side. These wounds he treated with his field dressing.

It had been raining almost incessantly and in spite of all efforts the Bren gun was now very rusty. However his freedom from capture in this period was probably due to the terrible weather conditions, one patrol passing within a couple of feet of him in the pounng ram.

On the fifth night he made his way between two previously noted listening posts and stole a small sampan. This proved to be leaky. After almost 24 hours using an improvised paddle he sighted land and was promptly wrecked on some rocks losing his weapons and boots. He managed to swim to shore and was by then utterly exhausted. In the morning he discovered that he was on another island. During the next three days he grew much weaker, became delirious and suffered from hallucinations and by the tenth day his need for food was so great that he abandoned his former caution and finding a Burmese homestead he appealed for help. He was promptly betrayed by the Headsman and led into an ambush of six Japanese soldiers. During ten days of ever present danger without food and under appalling weather conditions Mne CHAPPELL had shown daring, initiative and resource to the highest degree, retaining his weapons and his offensive spirit to the last whilst his devotion to duty and determination were in the highest tradition of the Services."

* In fact, this was Onchaung.

© Alec Colson
18th January 2006
This version 25,354 words.