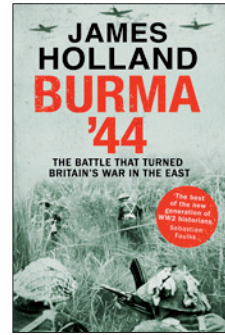


Book Reviews

BURMA '44: THE BATTLE THAT TURNED BRITAIN'S WAR IN THE EAST



BY JAMES HOLLAND

PUBLISHER: CORGI, 1 EDITION (20 APRIL 2017), (ISBN-13: 978-0593075852), 448 PAGES

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INTRODUCTION

British and Commonwealth forces campaigning in the South East Asian theatre of the Second World War have not received the same recognition as those operating in European or African theatres. This neglect was such that the XIVth Army was given the unfortunate epithet of the 'Forgotten Army' - an appellation that endures despite a growing appreciation of both the nature and importance of that campaign. James Holland seeks to address this imbalance in his book *Burma '44*, which focuses on the 'Battle of Admin Box', a small but significant part of the Allies' Burma offensive in early 1944.

Holland, a fellow of the Royal Historical Society, has presented and contributed to a number of documentaries based on his publications, exploring some of the more nuanced, yet strategically significant, actions of the Second World War. In *Burma '44* Holland argues that despite suffering over 3,500 casualties in the battle, British and Commonwealth forces achieved the first significant land victory against Japanese forces, who were considered to be superior jungle fighters. Churchill congratulated the XIVth Army post-battle and the Allied commander in the theatre, Lord Mountbatten, believed this victory was of equal significance to El Alamein, suggesting that this was

the turning point of the war in the East. Moreover, RAF Air Command South East Asia was fundamental in securing this victory but was, and to an extent is still, underrepresented in written histories. Therefore, it is refreshing that Holland addresses the change in Allied air power strategy which is given additional colour by the first-hand accounts of tactical air operations in austere conditions.

The lengthy prologue introduces a number of prominent personalities and units down to company level, which for a theatre of operations is obviously extensive, making the first 16 pages rather heavy going. However, the first section of Holland's book concisely describes the context, and rigours, of the Burma campaign. Tactical vignettes transition smoothly into strategic themes. The reader is introduced to the plethora of challenges faced by the XIVth Army's commander, General 'Bill' Slim, some of which were entirely of British making. These range from the frustrations of operating with equipment deemed obsolescent in other operational theatres to circumventing the extreme logistical challenges of jungle warfare. Accompanying the predictable friction of combined and joint operations, the logisticians of the XIVth Army had to source dozens of different types of rations to cater for religious and dietary variance amongst the British, Australian, Indian and Gurkha units of the Army, all in the aftermath of the 1943 Indian famine.

The chapters of the first section are short, rarely more than 10 pages, focusing primarily on one topic (such as regional geopolitics and the impact that the Indian independence movement had on the preparations for the 1944 Burma offensive), interspersed with relevant tales based around an individual or small formation, providing historical and tactical granularity. In this regard, Holland presents the campaign from a top-down perspective cogently, without risk of confusing the casual reader. The use of first-hand accounts is especially effective in conveying the horrors of jungle warfare, the brutality of the XIVth Army's Japanese adversary and the pervasive anxiety felt by Slim's men.

Section two focuses on the 15 day 'Battle of the Admin Box', in which Allied forces had become encircled and fought to hold their ground. The pace of the narrative remains rapid, mirroring the tactical situation. The florid use of language is particularly effective in conveying the sensations experienced in battle. As a tale of a comparatively small, isolated group of men fighting for survival in the face of extreme odds, similarities with Rorke's Drift or Thermopylae are inevitable. What sets this story apart are the personal insights of the battle: a soldier receiving a 21st birthday card from his mother during a resupply drop toward the end of the battle or another's anguish at the sounds of British soldiers being slaughtered but being unable to assist for fear of exposing his section's position.

Augmenting the stories of the XIVth Army's exploits is a significant focus on air operations in the theatre. Though perceived mainly as a land campaign, the RAF and USAAF were vital to the success of operations in the theatre. The main Japanese ground tactic was to

outflank and isolate formations, force a withdrawal, then occupy captured positions and exploit abandoned supplies. This meant that the Imperial Japanese Army infantryman was able to move and fight with relatively small loads, maximising mobility and speed. Slim's new order was that, if about to be surrounded, XIVth Army units were to form a 'box', stand their ground and await responsive aerial resupply whilst the Japanese ran out of rations and ammunition.

Establishing control of the air was ultimately fundamental in ensuring this victory and turning the tide of the war in the East. With newer marks of Spitfire replacing the older, less effective Hurricanes, the balance of control of the air swung in the favour of the Allies, affording Dakotas freedom of manoeuvre to effectively sustain the men in the 'Admin Box'. The integration of forces and use of air power in such an innovative manner remains exemplary. It is testament to Holland's appreciation of the joint nature of the campaign that the air effort is so well captured and rightly presented as decisive.

Burma '44 provides an informative insight into a number of concepts that remain relevant to present day commanders at all levels. For example: fostering a learning culture and supporting innovation; the necessity for responsive logistics systems in support of mobile operating formations; the 'warfighter first' mentality that Slim championed; the benefits of integrated command and control mechanisms; and the requirement for leaders, both tactical and strategic, to embrace and nurture moral, physical and conceptual development. These points, combined with an increased appreciation of the campaign, make this book a worthwhile investment. As a story of victory in the face of extreme adversity, of the indomitable spirit of British and Commonwealth fighting men, and of the decisive leadership of Slim, the content will resonate with more general audiences too.

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