

**Eulogy to a Man of No Consequence**

Vignettes from the military services

of the late

Colonel L.T. Firbank, O.B.E., M.I.D.

**1901 - 1992**

## SAM BROWNE'S CAVALRY



### BRITISH OFFICER - FULL DRESS

Watercolour drawing signed 'CEDRIC'

This officer wears Sam Browne's Cavalry full dress uniform in accordance with pre. 1922 regulations. In practice the use of full dress by Indian Cavalry after WW1 was largely limited to British Officers attending ceremonial occasions. Revised 1922 regulations for full dress were frequently ignored and the old uniform of the senior regiment, in this case 22nd Sam Browne's Cavalry (Frontier Force), continued to be worn

## BEGINNINGS

Leslie Telford ‘Binks’ Firbank came from good British stock. His grandfather was a child of the industrial revolution, a man of driving ambition. Climbing out of the Durham mines to make a fortune in contracting, he elevated his family through good education into the upper middle class.

Binks<sup>i</sup> was born on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1901 in Ceylon where his father, the miner’s son, was district engineer for the East India Railway. He was educated at Cheltenham and, choosing a military career, went on to RMA Woolwich [for which he rode and fenced] and in 1921 was commissioned to the Royal Artillery. One year later he was serving on the North West Frontier of India, for which he received his first award – the India General Service Medal with clasp for the “Waziristan 1921-24” campaign. Following further service with 100<sup>th</sup> Field Battery RA [4.5” howitzers] along the Frontier, where he held an independent command between Razmak and Bannu, he passed out Grade 1 from the Cavalry School at Saugor.<sup>ii</sup> Then in 1927 he “got his jacket”, that is to say he was selected for the Royal Horse Artillery, and found himself in command of the ammunition column for “G” Mercer’s Troop in Bolaram [Deccan].

In 1929 Binks transferred to the Indian Army. It offered better pay and promotion prospects, more opportunities for field service, and tremendous sporting facilities.<sup>iii</sup> He considered himself fortunate to be posted to Sam Browne’s Cavalry [12<sup>th</sup> Frontier Force]. It was a move he never regretted. The Frontier Force regiments were pretty well always busy making their presence felt along the tribal frontier regions. But Binks invariably managed to find time for sporting activities. He was an accomplished swordsman and sailor, excelled at polo and pig-sticking, racing, shooting, and swimming. He had also been an Army fencing and squash champion. In 1939 he was selected to represent Great Britain in the modern pentathlon at the 1940 Olympic Games, but the outbreak of WW2 put an end to this.<sup>iv</sup>

It is fair to say that Binks was the epitome of the type of British officer the Indian Army sought to employ. Recruitment standards were high, and only the best candidates emerged successfully from a rigorous selection process. Apart from his outstanding skills as a sportsman and athlete, Binks was later to demonstrate great gallantry in action. He had an aptitude for languages, knew much about Indian culture, and harboured a great admiration for the Indian soldier. He also had a healthy respect for the fighting qualities of his adversaries – whether Pathan tribesman or Japanese infantryman. He possessed a sound knowledge of art and literature and, on top of all, he had great personal charm. He was quite simply the perfect all-rounder. He cannot be better described than by Hugh Massingberd, obituroist of *The Daily Telegraph*, who wrote: “Binks Firbank was the ideal Edwardian gentleman, modest, courageous, cultured, impeccably mannered and sporting. He wrote long letters in elegant script, was a connoisseur of books, pictures and prints, and loved music and the ballet. He was unfailingly good tempered.”<sup>v</sup>

## PEACETIME

Life with Sam Browne's Cavalry suited Binks well. The Punjab Frontier Force regiments were the sentinels of the northwest, keeping watch along the wild frontier covering vast tracts of magnificent open country in frequently hazardous circumstances. There were always small local flash points in which the Frontier Force units became involved. For participation in the military operations to suppress one of the more serious tribal uprisings, Binks received his second campaign medal – the Indian General Service Medal with clasp for the North West Frontier 1936-37 expedition.

Then in January 1937, he was attached as Adjutant and Quartermaster to Kitchener College at Nowgong, where cadets were trained for entry into the Indian Military Academy. At about the same time his own regiment, Sam Browne's Cavalry, became the training centre for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group, and Binks managed to transfer to the 8<sup>th</sup> King George V's Own Cavalry in the hope that, when his time at Nowgong was up, his new regiment would provide opportunities for active service.

### SAM BROWNE'S CAVALRY, BOLARUM, DECCAN 1934



front to right									
<u>at rear</u>	not identified	Capt J Alford	not identified	Lieut RA Bailey	Jemadar Firoz Khan	Lieut WD Vanrenen	Risaldar Sadhu Singh	Lieut WMT Magan	not identified
<u>standing</u>	Risaldar Sham Singh	Capt LT Firbank	Risaldar Fateh Mohd	Capt ESTJ Birnie	Risaldar Kanshi Singh	Capt Mohd Ayub Khan	Jemadar Janak Singh	IDSM	
<u>seated</u>	Capt PGW Bullock	Jemadar Raja Singh	Maj DC Branfoot	Risaldar Udham Singh	Bt Col WAK Frazer DSO & Bar MVO MC	Risaldar Bidhi Chand	Maj IFG Hall	Risaldar Muzaffar Khan	Maj NE Marriot MC
<u>at front</u>			not identified			not identified		not identified	

## THE WAR YEARS

### THE NORTH WEST FRONTIER – 8<sup>TH</sup> LIGHT CAVALRY

General unrest had been simmering in Waziristan as a result of the activities of the fanatical Faqir of Ipi, and this had escalated in the Bannu and Kohat districts where gangs directed by Mehr Dil, a notorious outlaw and deserter, were raiding from their bases in the Ahmedzai Salient. In February 1940 an Indian Army force of two brigades was sent into the area to re-establish control by building roads and Frontier Constabulary posts within the Salient. The 8<sup>th</sup> Light Cavalry proceeded to Waziristan as part of this force. Binks was by this time back with his regiment, which was involved in operations to clear the area between the Bain Pass and Bannu of hostile tribesmen. The regiment was in camp close to the village of Khairu Khel. Binks was in command of B Squadron consisting of Punjabi Mussulmans, mostly Awans - tall warriors with bobbed hair and fair complexions, tracing their ancestry back to Alexander the Great's invading armies.

“At 5.30am, the adjutant came into his tent when he was still asleep: ‘Binks, there’s firing going on in that village two miles away’. His flask was filled, some sandwiches packed into his haversack while he got into his uniform. Outside his tent, the squadron awaited. ‘We marched on our horses out of the gate of the camp and then broke into a trot, not in a gallop as in Hollywood films. As we approached the village, we heard shooting into the village. I ordered the squadron to get behind the village and halt. Two machine guns were placed outside the village, where they could fire at the enemy.

I took two groups on foot, under cover just behind a spur. The others stayed as reserve and so we went up the hill. The followers of the Fakir of Ipi, who wanted to come into the village to steal arms and food, saw us coming up behind them. They bolted and went up the valley, and that was the end of the action.’”<sup>vi</sup>

For this action Binks was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire [OBE]. He was also mentioned in despatches for distinguished service in the Ahmedzai operations in Waziristan between February and May 1940.<sup>vii</sup>

The modest account by Binks and the award of the OBE, which was more often a reward for good service than for gallantry, hardly do justice to the actual events which took place. For a better appreciation, one needs to examine the original recommendation for the OBE award. These recommendations were not usually published. Indeed they were considered to be confidential. Fortunately the original correspondence covering Binks' OBE award is held on file in New Delhi by the impressive National Archives of India. From this record it is evident that this particular award was a reward for distinguished service whilst under enemy fire.

“On 12<sup>th</sup> March 1940, the 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry was operating with the F.C. [Frontier Constabulary] near Khan Khelan in Waziristan [map reference 5813].

A number of tribesmen had been engaged, and were showing considerable resistance from a series of *algads* in some high hills west of Khan Khelan.

The capture of a hill overlooking the tribesmen's position was considered vital if the operations were to be brought to a successful conclusion before nightfall.

Major L.T. Firbank, Commander of “B” Squadron of 8<sup>th</sup> Light Cavalry, appreciated this and, collecting a party from his Squadron, led them dismounted over difficult ground in the face of considerable fire, and established a position on top of this hill. He then himself came down the hill under fire and unaccompanied over a distance of several hundred yards to gain liaison with “A” Squadron Commander.

Major Firbank then proceeded to lead another party of his Squadron into the *algads* where the enemy were in position in trenches and caves and resisting stoutly. Under heavy fire and with complete disregard for danger, he himself captured two hostiles and was responsible for the rounding up of others.

Major Firbank set an inspiring example to his men and, by his own action at a critical time in the operation, was largely responsible for its success.”<sup>viii</sup>

By normal standards, Binks should have received the higher level award of the Distinguished Service Order for leadership and gallantry in this sharp frontier action<sup>ix</sup>, but the armed forces honours and awards system imposed a strict allocation on the number of awards granted to each of the services in any one year. Unfortunately for Binks, serious conflicts in other theatres had already put a strain on the availability of the DSO, and he had to make do with a lesser award, the OBE, perceived more as a reward for meritorious service than as a decoration for gallant and distinguished service in the face of the enemy.<sup>x</sup>



#### **ACTIVE SERVICE ON THE NORTHWEST FRONTIER**

“Chapies and corduroy trousers. Just the kit for night work or when you are likely to find yourself in the hills or nalas”

## SIDE-LINED

The affair at Khan Khelan was the last occasion that the 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry went into action as a horsed unit carrying sabres. In October 1940 the 8<sup>th</sup> KGO Light Cavalry received orders to mechanise, and proceeded to convert to armoured cars.<sup>xi</sup> But disappointment followed. There were constant demands on the regiment to supply drafts for other units, and no opportunity for field service. Most of its Jats were transferred to the newly formed 44<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, out of which was found the ill-fated 100<sup>th</sup> Independent Light Tank Squadron. Entirely composed of ex-8th Light Cavalry men, this unfortunate unit arrived in Singapore just before the capitulation of the British garrison, and spent the rest of the war in captivity. In command was Major Jack “Boy” Alford who died in captivity and is buried at Kranji War Cemetery. Alford had served in Sam Browne’s Cavalry (see photograph above of Sam Browne’s Cavalry at Bolarum in 1934) and transferred at the same time as Binks to the 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. But in spite of the growing involvement of the Indian Army in operations in the Middle East and African theatres against German and Italian forces, and against Japan in the east, Binks was unable to get into the action. Once again he found himself in advisory and educational rôles. From September 1941 he was appointed Assistant Military Advisor to the Indian States Forces [Baroda], and Commandant of the Indian States Forces Cadet School at Indore, Central India. It would be April 1945 before the 8<sup>th</sup> Light Cavalry finally saw action in Burma as Recce Regiment with 19<sup>th</sup> Indian Division – the famous Dagger Division – with which it then fought in all of the Division’s major actions until the cease fire in September 1945. Well before this, Binks had found a way of getting up to the front line.



**COMMANDANT, INDIAN STATES FORCES TRAINING SCHOOL,  
INDORE, CENTRAL INDIA 1942**

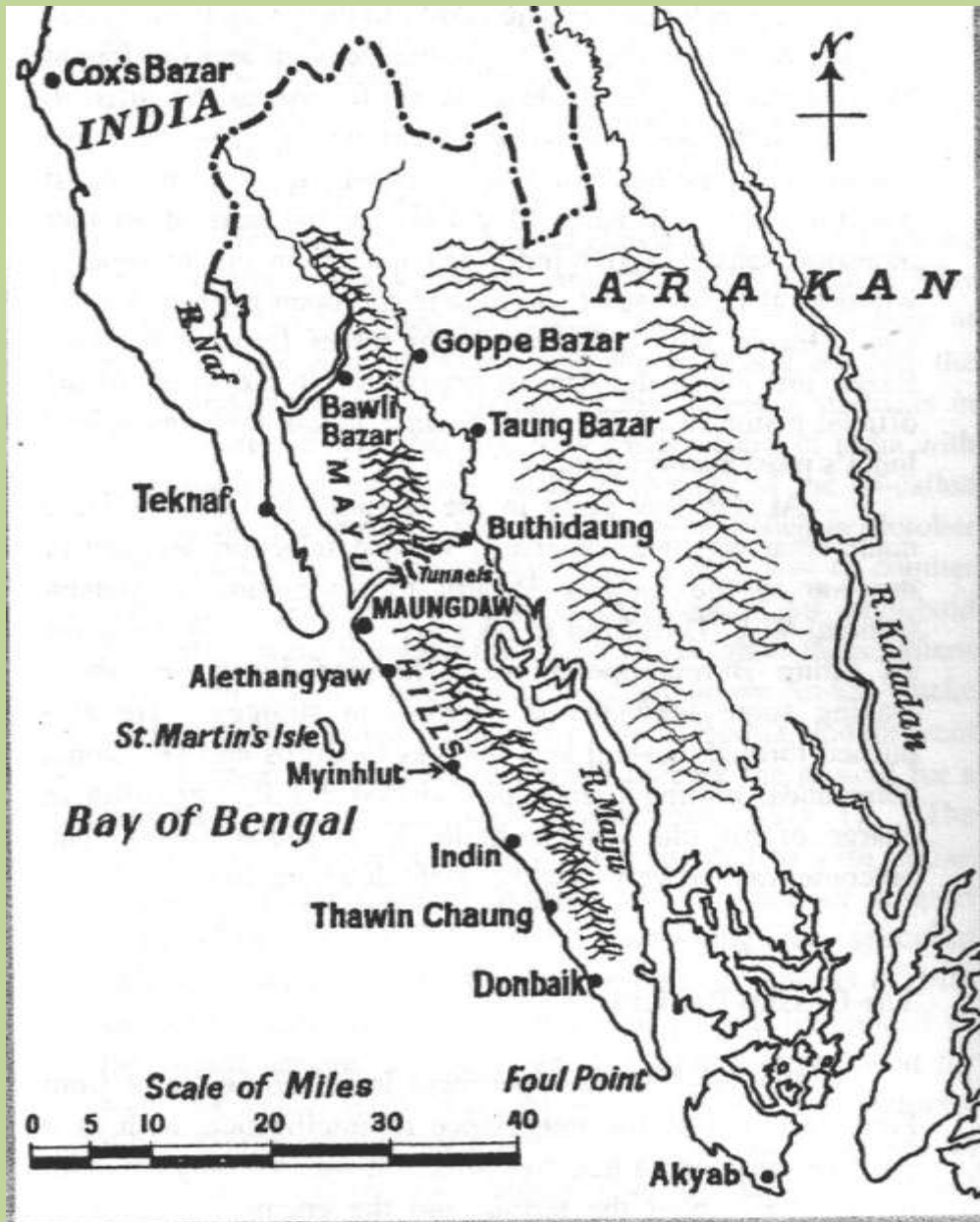
Major Firbank is wearing the Indian Army Cavalry regulation side cap with an 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry silver badge comprising numeral and crossed lances

## THE ARAKAN

The fierce and prolonged fighting in the Arakan was a preliminary phase in the overall military campaign which led to the ultimate defeat of the Japanese Imperial Army in Burma, and within this specific theatre of operations the part played by Binks cannot be described as having any great significance. He was only one of many who contributed to the final Allied victory. It is difficult to pinpoint his actual services. He kept no records himself, and his close comrades have all passed on. Official sources, such as they are, are difficult to access. However his involvement in commando operations along the Japanese-occupied Arakan Coast, which commenced during the closing months of 1943, came at a time when the morale of the Allied forces, dug in along the length of Burma/East India Frontier, had just about reached its lowest ebb. In this sense, he came on stage at a critical moment in the Burma campaign.

The situation was indeed extremely grim. Following the disastrous retreat from Burma<sup>xiii</sup> which ended in May 1942, the Japanese had effectively taken over the whole of Burma. The loss of Akyab and the Burma coast left the command of the Bay of Bengal to the Japanese, and this in turn threatened the 1200 mile long eastern coast of India with a Japanese invasion. One of the objectives of the so-called First Arakan Campaign, which had been launched in October 1942 during the Burma cold-weather season, was to counter this threat. The specific tasks set by General Sir Archibald Wavell<sup>xiii</sup> were to retake the island of Akyab at the southern end of the Mayu Peninsular and occupy upper Arakan, make contact with Japanese forces in Upper Burma and prevent their further advance, and generally prepare the ground for a land-based advance through Burma. The execution of Wavell's strategy was entrusted to 14<sup>th</sup> Indian Division [Major General Wilfred Lloyd] with air support from 224<sup>th</sup> Group RAF. But achieving the specified objectives would not be the only important benefits of 14<sup>th</sup> Division's campaign. "Throughout this period, the morale of the Allied nations was at a very low ebb, and the need for some successful action was considered essential to counteract this defeatist attitude."<sup>xiv</sup> In the event, the campaign was an unmitigated disaster. The original plan for taking Akyab had been based on a sea-borne attack, but for several reasons, one being the shortage of landing craft, it was changed to an advance down the Mayu Peninsula for which Lloyd was neither sufficiently prepared nor fully equipped. His troops were adequate in numbers but not in experience. He was seriously short of accurate intelligence, and air and artillery support was not yet up to dealing with Japanese defensive works. The technique of using tanks to bust deep bunkers had still not been perfected.<sup>xv</sup> Out-maneuvred and out-fought by an adversary who made more skilful use of the difficult terrain, pretty well everything went wrong. The offensive turned into another wholesale retreat. It was the worst possible result. In early May 1943, at the start of another monsoon season, India Command had no option but to order a withdrawal right back to India and the open country around Cox's Bazar, with only some light forces forward at Bawli Bazar, just inside the Arakan frontier.<sup>xvi</sup> In the words of the official historian of *The War Against Japan*, this was indeed India's most dangerous hour.<sup>xvii</sup>

At this low point in the fortunes of India Command, it made what was unquestionably its best selection decision of the war in the Eastern Theatre by appointing Lieutenant General W.J. 'Bill' Slim to take over as GOC 14<sup>th</sup> Army for all future Burma operations. He immediately set about making some fundamental changes in strategy. He also pushed through several key changes to Corps and Divisional commands, putting Lieutenant General A.F.P. Christison in charge of his old command, the XV Indian Corps. The outcome was felt very quickly - right down the line.



MAP 1

## THE ARAKAN

### ZONE OF OPERATIONS OF XV INDIAN CORPS

#### THE COASTAL RAIDERS

Possibly the most pertinent lesson to be learnt from First Arakan was the importance of intelligence, both in a positive sense and a negative sense. It was not only essential to know all about the terrain and the enemy, using every available resource including specialised intelligence and reconnaissance units, it was also highly advantageous to limit the

intelligence available to the enemy, to confuse him as to the intentions and movements of friendly forces, and to keep him permanently off-balance.

It was vital that these lessons should be put into practice. Projecting this need onto the strategic situation in the Arakan in the closing months of 1943, it was clear that a structure was required for mounting intelligence operations and amphibious hit-and-run activities along the Japanese maritime flank, with the more specific objective of harassing Japanese forces south of Maungdaw. This led to the decision to strap together an amphibious force in the Naf River combining both military and R.I.N. [Royal Indian Navy] resources<sup>xviii</sup>. The military element was accommodated within the HQ Group of Christison's XVth Indian Corps. It was a loose knit grouping of mobile hard-hitting fighting units working in tandem with an intelligence resource and a motley collection of support units. Unfortunately the scarcity of published material has drawn something of a veil over the exceptional series of cloak and dagger operations in which these units subsequently took part.

Central to the intelligence collecting activity was a highly acclaimed unit known as V Force which had originally been created during the closing stages of the Retreat and envisaged as a force of armed native volunteers to harass Japanese lines of communication. In the event, it did fine service in assisting refugees during the Retreat. Thereafter it developed skills in operating behind Japanese lines along the north-east front in Manipur and along the Assam border. It was highly effective at intelligence collecting and supplying forward units with invaluable reports on enemy movements and strengths. It was mainly officered by Burma civil servants and police officers. It also provided the essential services of local guides and interpreters. As the war progressed, it became more involved in armed raids. In the Arakan a separate wing of V Force evolved commanded by Major D.C.B. 'Sherlock' Holmes.<sup>xix</sup> At the outset, information and intelligence gathering was its most valuable contribution

Where armed raids were the order of the day, muscle for the amphibious operations was provided by the 81<sup>st</sup> West African Divisional Reconnaissance Regiment commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Richard Cartwright, another cavalry officer but from the British Army - seconded from the Inniskilling Dragoons. His African warriors carried their long-bladed machetes with much the same vigour and enthusiasm as the Gurkhas carried their kukris. They terrorised the Japanese infantryman with their ferocity in battle, and a notoriety for making trophies of their victims' ears.

The planning and execution of coastal raiding was based upon a spontaneous partnership between the commanders of the three core units involved: V Force [Holmes], 81<sup>st</sup> WA Recce Regt [Cartwright], and 290 SP Coy [Firbank]. "Together they formed a private 'combined operations' task force which had no staff, but whose three commanders planned and executed their strikes swiftly and with the maximum economy of force."<sup>xx</sup> Soon after the start of raiding operations, 5<sup>th</sup> Division gave Cartwright's West African command an additional unit, the 85<sup>th</sup> Infantry Company, 12<sup>th</sup> Frontier Force Regiment. This was in itself an odd-ball unit which had been specifically trained for commando operations. Very little is known about it. In broad terms, Garrison Battalions and Garrison [or Infantry] Companies of the Indian Army were raised for the purpose of releasing higher-grade units from tasks such as internal security and static guard duty both in India and Allied occupied territories. Personnel were recruited from pensioners, ex-soldiers, low medical categories and over-age applicants.<sup>xxi</sup> One can deduce from Condon's history of the 12<sup>th</sup> Frontier Force Regiment that one Infantry Company and six Garrison Companies were raised within the 12<sup>th</sup> Frontier Force Regiment during WW2.<sup>xxii</sup> Although Condon makes no distinction between them, it is evident that the

composition of the 85<sup>th</sup> Inf Coy, and the purposes for which it was raised, were quite different from the six Garrison Companies.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In or around May 1942, it was decided that additional resource would be required to support activities envisaged for Force 136 in occupied Persia<sup>xxiv</sup>. Arising from this, Major J.S.A Selwyn of the Frontier Constabulary, seconded to Force 136, was instructed to raise a company of volunteers from the Frontier Force Regiment and the Frontier Constabulary. For reasons of convenience rather than to fit any standard pattern of nomenclature, this unit was entitled 85<sup>th</sup> Infantry Company, Frontier Force Regiment.<sup>xxv</sup> There is no doubt that the volunteers, who appear to have been all Pathans, were selected on the basis of being able-bodied and well-motivated – and so were not in the same category as Garrison Company recruits. After some conventional preparation at 12FFR Regimental Centre in Sialkot, there followed a period of training in commando operations in the Bombay area. In the event, Force 136 decided it could do without the Pathans, and 85 SP Coy was snapped up by 14<sup>th</sup> Army for planned commando operations along the Arakan coast under XV Indian Corps. John Selwyn describes what happened next.<sup>xxvi</sup>

“Unorthodoxy was the keynote throughout and few ‘armies’ could have been more private. On our way from Bombay to the Burma Front we received a movement order to arrive in Calcutta but none to leave Bombay. I therefore went to the Automobile Association of Western India and got a route card showing Dak bungalows between Bombay and Calcutta. Off we went bluffing our way along the line for petrol and rations, supplemented by shooting game with .303 rifles. In due course we went down to Arakan and based ourselves on an Inland Water Transport Company commanded by yet another old friend ‘Binks’ Firbank, originally Sam Browne’s Cavalry. Until the monsoon put a stop to all this we had great fun at a cost of only two killed and collected two Military Medals.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

## “BINKS’ NAVY”

Water-borne transportation was a fundamental requirement for mounting amphibious operations. It was with this in mind that the 290<sup>th</sup> Special Purpose Company, Inland Water Transport,<sup>xxviii</sup> had been taken into XV Corps as the main platform for the cloak and dagger activities which were envisaged along the Arakan coast. The 290 SP Coy’s flotilla included eight ancient shallow draught wood-fired Sunderban river steamers. They were variously named “*Surmai*”, “*Yenguar*”, “*Winifred*”, “*Damodar*”, “*Kamakyi*”, “*Esther*”, “*Curtana*” and “*Torotya*”.<sup>xxix</sup> The steamers were supplemented by four motor launches and some barges. There were also a dozen Fleming-pattern lifeboats, commandeered by Selwyn to act as landing craft for his Pathan commandos and towed around by Binks’ steamers, rather like mother ducks pursued by their offspring. From time to time heavily armed and fast Fairmile motor launches from the Royal Indian Navy’s 56<sup>th</sup> Flotilla were assigned to support duties. More often than not this turned out to be ML413 commanded by Lieutenant L.C.A. ‘Leo’ Green RINVR.<sup>xxx</sup>

There was a lot of competition from sidelined Indian Army officers anxious to get into active war service, and Binks attributed his good fortune in getting the command of 290 SP Coy to his knowledge of sailing and an ability to navigate by the stars.<sup>xxxi</sup> These were skills that few of his rivals were likely to have had, and indeed substantially more than his subordinates were to display as “... his captains were young subalterns with no knowledge of the sea

whatsoever”.<sup>xxxii</sup> His operational base was located on Jackson’s Jetty at Teknaf in the Naf River.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Something of the flavour of his unconventional command is conveyed by Lucas Phillips in this extract from “The Raiders of Arakan”.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

“All [the steamers] were wholly innocent of navigational gear. They were manned by Bengali civilians, a windy lot, and commanded by sporting young Indian Army officers whose ignorance of seamanship was total. Their C.O., the debonair Major ‘Binks’ Firbank, found them ‘nice chaps but a wildly undisciplined lot, who took a little bringing to heel’. Binks himself, who had been seconded from Sam Browne’s Cavalry, was a charming personality who had been a yachtsman since boyhood and his colourful and ebullient figure, clad usually in little else than very short shorts [held up by a rope] and a piratical scarf, became one of the familiar sights to all who trafficked in the muddy waters of the Naf. He and Holmes<sup>xxxv</sup>, who were kindred spirits in their love of independence and adventure, had become friends at Teknaf, where the Company was stationed and where one or more of its ships were usually to be seen at Jackson’s Jetty.”

The piratical Binks was not long in making a reputation for himself along the Arakan coast. Having appointed himself Admiral of the Fleet, his ancient flotilla soon came to be known by his Coastal Forces henchmen *inter alia* as “Binks’ Navy”.<sup>xxxvi</sup> This sobriquet for 290 SP Coy is on the record, so to speak, as it was used by the official historian of the Royal Indian Navy who described how the ancient IWT steamers were armed with anti-tank guns mounted on wheels, with Bren guns tied to the hand-rails as anti-aircraft defence.<sup>xxxvii</sup> But if armament was unconventional, other normally essential equipment was either non-existent or rudimentary in the extreme – **if** not to say downright dangerous.

“The navigation had to be seen to be believed, and messages were passed by lighting bonfires on deck. One captain woke one morning to find a cow looking through his porthole and his ship 200 yards from the water, where it remained until the next spring tide.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The principal tasks that were actually performed during his tenure of command were broadly summarised by Binks as “assisting parties raiding down the Arakan coast, collecting enemy prisoners and deceiving the enemy.”<sup>xxxix</sup> The deception rôle in XVth Indian Corps was entrusted to a unit known as “D [for Deception] Force”, the element co-operating with 290 SP Coy being commanded by another Indian Cavalry officer – Major ‘Frankie’ Wilson, 19<sup>th</sup> KGO Lancers whose fine and characterful sketches have illustrated many books and periodicals on Indian Army history and uniforms.<sup>xl</sup> His creative skills were applied to performances of sound effects designed to deceive Japanese forward units. With equipment rigged up on Binks’ steamers, D Force risked life and limb in forays up *chaungs* making deceptive troop movement noises, dropping off the refuse of American provisions along the Arakan coast in locations where no Americans had ever been.

But for XV Indian Corps the main purpose was undoubtedly the commando raiding activities, which were intended to harass the Japanese military and thus force it to commit unduly large forces to protect its positions along the Arakan coast.<sup>xli</sup> This explains the commitment of another unit to the coastal raiding forces - 44 Royal Marine Commando. Although the Marines brought with them much of their own specialised transport, they still required 290 SP Coy to ferry them in and out of some extremely perilous situations, as did the lusty West Africans as well. Sparse they may be, but the available records of commando raids make

frequent reference to Binks' Navy – although not always complimentary. The professional training of the Marines, and their high standards of performance, gave little leeway for tolerating incompetence, particularly when they were engaged in operations against the enemy. At times this led to some friction between the Marines and their keen and courageous but, it must be said, somewhat amateurish comrades in the Inland Water Transport service.



**“THE ADMIRAL OF THE NAF”**

Drawn by Frankie Wilson 19<sup>th</sup> Lancers, then a Major in D Force, of L T Firbank Commanding 290 Special Purpose Coy in the Arakan 1943-4 during operations against the Japanese. 290 Special Purpose Coy consisted of seven Sundaban Flotilla Steamers commanded by Indian Army Officers. Its purpose was to assist parties Raiding down the Arakan coast, collecting enemy prisoners and deceiving the enemy.  
[Manuscript notes on reverse made by Binks Firbank]

The first series of commando raids in which Binks' Navy was involved was timed to coincide with the switch in the axis of XV Corps' offensive to the east of the Mayu range, prior to the opening of the major Second Arakan offensive. It was particularly important to keep the Japanese off balance at such a critical moment, and convenient targets were identified by V Force scouts [see Map 2].

The Japanese had mounted a gun near a coastal village called Alethangyaw – ‘I’ll-Thank-You<sup>xliii</sup>, with about 30 troops supported by a number of machine guns covering the beach. The plan hatched by Cartwright was to make a water-borne landing during the night of 27<sup>th</sup>



MAP 2

**THE MAIN RAIDING GROUND. OUTLINES AT LOW TIDE.**

**NAHKAUNGDO ['NO CAN DO'] AND OTHER PLACES BECOME ISLANDS AT HIGH WATER**

Jan 1944, take the gun and destroy the garrison in a lightning hit and run raid. After consultation with Binks and the V Force commander, it was agreed that Cartwright's Nigerian squadron supported by V Force scouts would be embarked on two 290 SP Coy steamers. Not to be left out of the action, Binks personally commanded the two little steamers which, in addition to the soldiery and their equipment, were also loaded with six *kistis*<sup>xliii</sup> to be used as landing craft. The first effort failed due to high surf and a strong ebb tide. Two *kistis* were swamped and too much time had been lost. The attack was called off, but far from being deterred, two days later an even stronger raid was launched on the same Japanese position, strengthened by John Selwyn's 85 Inf Coy and heightened in its initial impact on the

unsuspecting Japanese by the participation of Frankie Wilson with some of his D Force special effects.

“A devil’s symphony of all the roars and fireworks of a big battle .... gun blasts, the whistle and burst of shells, the growling of approaching tanks, coloured rockets and tracer bullets made up the major part of their infernal repertoire.”<sup>xliv</sup>

The Japanese were caught by surprise and completely terrorised. They fled, leaving the raiders to withdraw unmolested to their boats in daylight as the Japanese artillery from the hills further inland harmlessly shelled their vacated positions from a safe distance. Documents abandoned by the enemy showed that Alethangyaw was held by units of 144<sup>th</sup> Regiment which had been in the Pacific and had not accompanied 55<sup>th</sup> Division to Burma.<sup>xlv</sup> This information was of great significance to an understanding of Japanese intentions, as it pointed to a build-up of forces in preparation for the planned invasion of India. How this vital information was ignored by higher command is quite another story.



Raids were now taking place almost daily, and the field of operations was extending outwards. On 18<sup>th</sup> February, an urgent call came in from XV Corps Intelligence which was anxious to know whether the enemy was moving reinforcements up from Akyab. This could only be achieved by securing Japanese unit identifications well down the Mayu Peninsula towards Akyab island, and further south than any previous raids. After careful discussion by the three commanders, Indin was agreed as the ideal target for an intelligence gathering raid. It was an isolated village close to the coast on the Bay of Bengal, surrounded by paddy-fields which had become overgrown by neglect. It was garrisoned by a small Japanese Army detachment which, according to V Force information, had only recently established itself there. Again it was the Nigerians of 81 WA Recce Regt who were tasked with storming the village, and on 19<sup>th</sup> February Binks transported them on *Torotya*, putting them on the beach

after dark about one mile from their objective. The raid was a complete success. Several Japanese were killed, and identifications including pay-books and letters, together with a Japanese flag, were collected. The raiders were then picked up by *Torotya*, and the Japanese flag was presented to Binks as a trophy for his ward room.

### THE STAKES GET HIGHER

In early March 1944 the arrival on the scene of two elements of 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Service Brigade heralded a significant increase in the level of penetration of Japanese-held territory. For just over a month, 5<sup>th</sup> [Army] Commando and 44<sup>th</sup> [Royal Marine] Commando worked with the amphibious forces along the coastal strip. The allocation of this high quality and hard-hitting resource was a measure of how crucial the activities of Arakan coastal forces had become to XV Corps' drive south towards Akyab. The first combined operation code-named "Screwdriver" coincided with 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division's assault on Razabil during the night of 11<sup>th</sup> March. Achievement of its objectives, to intercept enemy reinforcements and supplies, and prevent attempted counter-attacks, required the Commandos to set up strategically placed strong-points or boxes well into the coastal strip. This activity was later combined with more extensive raids, and there was some severe fighting.

In mid-March a troop of 5 Commando had 27 men killed in a surprise Japanese attack [290 SP Coy was not in any way involved], and this serious loss made a deep impression on Lieutenant Colonel Cyril Horton, in command of 44 Commando. It underlined the tenacity of the Japanese enemy, and the need for a high level of efficiency and field-craft in dealing with them. Getting in and out of contact with the enemy was a critical part of any operation, and this is where the efficiency of Binks' 290 SP Coy came in for some sharp criticism.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Service Brigade commander, Brigadier W.J. "Growler" Nonweiler, had ordered 5 Commando to withdraw from its boxes at Kanyindan and Dodan as information brought in by V Force scouts reported that strong Japanese forces were concentrating around Alethangyaw and 5 Commando risked being cut off. The tricky operation of pulling back began at dawn on 21<sup>st</sup> March, and involved 44 Commando taking over the box at Nahkaungdo from elements of 5 Commando through which the main body would withdraw. Transport was provided by Binks' Navy.

"As 44 approached Nahkaungdo, packed tightly together on two towed Higgins dump barges, Allied dive bombers flew low overhead to attack the Japanese positions. Later, when the marines landed it was discovered that Alethangyaw was unoccupied. The landing craft grounded 50 yards from the beach. Their late arrival was blamed on the falling tide. It was obvious the Inland Water Transport Command had not taken heed of the problems identified and passed on by 44's advance party." <sup>xlvi</sup>

In spite of the blunt criticisms handed out by 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Service Brigade commanders, it seems that Binks' scratch crews of untrained civilian *matelots* were unable to match up to the levels of efficiency expected by them. Low-scale cloak and dagger raiding was one thing. Acting as part of a high profile Commando attack force was quite another, and not exactly what had been envisaged. It is not surprising therefore that Binks' Navy was destined to sail into some more troubled water before Special Service Brigade left the Arakan theatre.

At sea off the ARAKAN coast Dec 1943  
 Operations against the Japs BURMA



Maj. Frankie Wilson  
 19<sup>th</sup> Lancers  
 D Force  
 15<sup>th</sup> Corps

Brig Nonweiler  
 ("Growler")  
 Comd R. Marines  
 Commandos

Lt. Col. Cornwall  
 ("Duke")  
 R. Marines

Maj. Binks Firbank  
 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry  
 Comd. 290  
 Special Purpose  
 Company.

On 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> April, as part of a major reallocation of Special Service Brigade units, 44 Commando was pulled out of its positions around Nahkaungdo. Three DUKWs and two of 290 SP Coy steamers with a Higgins dump barge were allocated to the task of re-embarking the marines and their equipment. It was specified that all craft should reach the loading points by high tide at 23.45 hrs, so that the marines could disengage and complete the embarkation operation under cover of darkness.

"Radio reception began in the morning of 10<sup>th</sup> April, the aim being to persuade the enemy that any increased boat activity was consistent with 44 being relieved by another infantry unit. In fact 44's marines were told no different at the time. The authentic withdrawal plan was something entirely different.

On the first night, one half of Commando HQ plus one section from each rifle troop were to be withdrawn. During the following day, the remaining marines would carry out routine operations, leaving their positions for the second night's withdrawal as late as possible, in order to arrive at Nahkaungdo by midnight. During the second day a strong enemy patrol closed on 44's positions, presumably to investigate whether

they were still occupied. The patrol was driven off by the now depleted Commando. Japanese curiosity had probably been aroused by the first night's withdrawal.

Two river craft with one Higgins dump barge had arrived nearly four hours late! Forced to await the next high tide, the vessels left the following morning, loaded with marines in full view of the enemy. Local sampans and dugout canoes were pressed into service to ferry marines, still occupying the outlying positions, back to Nahkaungdo. Most of these craft were unseaworthy. When a sudden squall hit the boats, one craft capsized throwing its passengers into the water. One marine [A Troop] was drowned. His body was recovered and buried the next day.

During the withdrawal stage Lt Col Horton made vigorous representations to the Inland Water Transport Command emphasising the necessity for the vessels to reach the designated embarkation points on time. The CO was disturbed that the crews were insufficiently trained to operate craft in tidal waters and had no appreciation of tide tables or elementary navigation.

The total inefficiency of these crews was unfortunately demonstrated on the second phase of the withdrawal. Once again the boats were late to arrive. The Higgins dump barge was missing from the ragtag flotilla. The first of two large river craft broached beam-on as it approached the quayside.

A DUKW endeavouring to tow the river craft back into deep water was immobilised. The second river craft broke down as it approached the key and was forced to anchor in midstream. The DUKWs saved the day however, and the first river craft was towed into deep water to rejoin its sister ship anchored off the quayside. The DUKWs were then employed to ferry the remaining marines out to the larger vessels. All 44's men were finally loaded on board various craft by 03.00 hrs on 13<sup>th</sup> April. The two river craft, lashed together, with only one of four engines serviceable, set off up the Naf River to Nhila at a steady one-and-a-half knots." <sup>xlvii</sup>

Soon after 44 Commando's withdrawal from the coastal plain, all units of 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Service Brigade were transferred to Silchar in Assam where elements of XV Indian Corps had joined 14<sup>th</sup> Army's critical efforts to block the Japanese drive into India. One can imagine that it was with something of a sigh of relief that Binks was able to return 290 SP Coy to its somewhat more irregular activities. They included the frequent employment of his flotilla as a platform for mounting air-sea rescues along the enemy-occupied coast.

The safe recovery of downed RAF aircrew was the sort of successful event that SEAC's PR unit was anxious to cover as part of the general effort to maintain morale. This was always near the top of SEAC Head Quarter's priorities, and PR officers were frequently to be found buzzing around Teknaf looking for material and what might now be called photo opportunities. One such effort involved protracted attempts to rescue Warrant Officer John R.G. Campbell of the RNZAF attached to 258 Squadron RAF. On 2 April 1944, while tree-hopping over the Mayu River close to the Arakan coastline, his aircraft struck the mast of a river boat and crashed into the water in flames. Having survived the crash, he attempted to make his way to the coast. En route he was set upon by hostile villagers who stole most of his gear. Having got away from this second calamity, he then ran into a Japanese patrol which he managed to elude in the dark. Thereafter his plight was reported to V Force scouts, and

rescue operations were at once implemented by ‘Sherlock’ Holmes, the V Force commander. The first attempt ended in near disaster.

“From Binks Firbank he borrowed a motor launch, captained by Charles Cornish, and from Cyril Horton he secured a small squad of Royal Marines under Edward Sturges, accompanied by Tony Macan. The party set out from No-Can-Do <sup>xlvi</sup> on the night of 11 April under a full moon, towing a *kisti*, but ran into trouble after about twelve miles, when [Cornish having no map!] the ship struck a rock in dangerous waters. She soon developed a list on the port bow. With every wave there was a horrible crunching sound. Water slopped into the engine room. The Bengali crew lost their heads and threw up their arms. The engine-room hands ran up on deck to add to the panic, leaving the engine running and the screw whirring in the air. On all sides there were cries of ‘Allah! Allah!’ Holmes was instinctively reminded of the panicky disciples on the Lake of Galilee crying: ‘Master, Master, we perish.’ Cornish was at his wits’ end to control them. Hands were already beginning to abandon ship. To add to the predicament, a Japanese post ashore had seen them in the bright moonlight and began to open fire with a machine gun. The rounds fell far short but the anxiety was not lessened.” <sup>xlix</sup>

Eventually the ship was taken over by Sturges and his marines. She went full astern, eased off the rocks and righted herself at once. The rescue party then proceeded on its perilous mission, and the *kisti* was eventually put ashore only to find that it was in the wrong location. The attempt was abandoned, and it took all of seven days and another two expeditions before the pilot was finally rescued. There was never any question that the RAF flyer would not be found and brought back, in spite of the great difficulties involved in a quest of this sort. Very wisely, the later expeditions took greater account of navigational hazards. More of Binks’ brood, including the steamer *Torotya*, were variously employed, but this time with an officer of the Bengal Pilotage Service at the helm. Much was made of this rescue operation, and a Public Relations Film Unit was standing by when Warrant Officer Campbell was brought in safely to the V Force base at Maungdaw. <sup>1</sup>

The Indian Army has a long and successful tradition of raising irregular units to deal with crises along its frontiers, and Binks’ Navy was one of its very last during the British era. In the event it met the challenge and, in spite of some stern criticism from 44 Commando, it achieved what was expected of it. Its activities extended from Calcutta and the Sunderbans to Chittagong, Cox’s Bazaar, Teknaf, Tombru, Shahpuri Point, Godusara, Kanyundan, Alethangyaw, and St Martins Island in the Bay of Bengal. <sup>li</sup> In recognition of his services, Binks received a Mention in Dispatches for “operations on the Eastern Frontier of India from 16<sup>th</sup> November 1943 until 15<sup>th</sup> May 1944”. <sup>lii</sup>

### **IN COMMAND OF 2/7 RAJPUT IN BURMA** <sup>liii</sup>

This Indian Army battalion had an outstanding war record. It served in the Eastern theatre throughout World War Two as part of 4th Indian Infantry Brigade in the 26<sup>th</sup> Indian Division. The “Tiger Head Division” <sup>liv</sup> was one of five infantry divisions in XV Indian Corps. During the bitter fighting in the Arakan during 1943-4, 2/7 Rajput opposed the Japanese in at least nine major actions culminating in the battle for Point 551. This hill, held by a determined Japanese garrison, was vital to the control of the Maungdaw-Buthidaung road in what was generally known as the “tunnels area”, and its capture was essential to the completion of 14<sup>th</sup>

Army's spring tasks before the monsoon set in. After repeated attacks over a three week period by other battalions had failed, it was finally taken by 2/7 Rajput for which the battalion received an IOM [Indian Order of Merit], five MCs, and two MMs. This was the turning point of the Arakan campaign, when the myth of Japanese invincibility had been finally shattered.

The *coup de grâce* in Burma could not yet be delivered. With the needle rapidly falling, 26<sup>th</sup> Indian Division was ordered back to its planned monsoon line to rest, re-equip and re-train. It was during this crucial retirement period that Lieutenant Colonel Leslie Telford Firkbank OBE MID, recently promoted on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1944, was given command of the 2/7 Rajput. This battalion was within the same Corps as Binks' I.W.T. Company. Someone had spotted him. There was little purpose in leaving him with his I.W.T. unit which by now had become largely redundant as the battle for the Arakan veered southwards. It was a huge relief to Binks that he had finally got his feet into the stirrups. He had aspired to this challenge, prepared himself for it over many years. Now at last he was to lead a professional fighting unit into battle. Throughout autumn he prepared with his battalion for the coming campaign. There was to be a series of daring leapfrog landings, one following rapidly upon the other down the Arakan coast. It would lead to the complete and devastating rout of the Japanese forces.

The first landings made by 26<sup>th</sup> Division were on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1945 at Ramree Island, a highly important asset with its excellent harbour facilities, and airstrips only ninety-bomber-minutes from both Rangoon and Mandalay. Whilst most key objectives had been taken within the first week, it took several months to finally mop up all of the Japanese die-hard remnants. As with all of the Burma campaign, it was a nasty, ferocious affair.

The main thrust of 26<sup>th</sup> Division continued moving south. In February, successful landings were made near the village of Pyin-wan, and within ten days the Division had pressed on along the coastal road to within eleven miles of Taungup, a major defensive position for the Japanese army. "An incident during this phase was the capture of five Jap tankettes – two of them intact – in a trap sprung by men of the 13<sup>th</sup> Frontier Force Rifles and 7<sup>th</sup> Rajput Regiment, reinforced by Grant tanks of 146<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Royal Armoured Corps. The Frontier Force men spotted the Jap tankettes advancing swiftly down the road towards them. They let them through without interference and immediately went to work to construct a road block behind them. Five miles further down the road the Jap tankettes ran into the follow-up battalion of the Rajput Regiment – and the Grants. Jungle-covered hills rise steeply on either side of the narrow winding track. As the Rajputs drove forward, the crews of the Japanese tankettes saw that they were trapped. They leaped out and made a dash for the jungle. Three of their tankettes they managed to set on fire. But the other two, the victors carried away in triumph." <sup>lv</sup>

Collecting intelligence of enemy strengths and movements remained problematic throughout the Burma campaigns, not least because the fanatical Japanese soldier was difficult to capture alive. Better death than the disgrace of imprisonment by his Emperor's foes. Binks rarely spoke of his experiences in Burma, but his humanity shines out in a tale he would tell as a mechanism to forestall any incursion into the darker side of this dreadful campaign. His battalion managed to capture a live Japanese private soldier. Dirty, half-starved, lost and defenceless, he seemed to Binks to be small and pathetic, as he waited for the British to conduct his execution. He assumed the mug of hot tea was part of the final rites, and he made a last request through the interpreter. The *colonel-san* would perform the act of execution?

This would bring honour to a soldier. Binks felt nothing but pity. How could he feel anger or hatred for this miserable wretch? But the job had to be done. This last request was denied, and “pentathol” was administered. Nothing came out of it. The pathetic bundle of rags and bones had nothing to tell.

The Imperial Japanese Army, whilst close to defeat in Burma in the closing months of 1944, was far from ready to throw in the towel. With its back to the wall, it was fighting more fanatically than ever before. This meant that yet more demands were to be made on the British and Indian soldiers, fighting in the inhospitable Burmese jungles against a tenacious enemy who far preferred to die fighting than to surrender.

For a brave soldier to receive an award for an act of outstanding gallantry, much depended on the attitude and communication skills of his unit commander whose job it was to put in the recommendations for all such awards. The relative importance ascribed to this somewhat retrospective function by different unit commanders inevitably resulted in some disparity in the distribution of awards. Binks recalled that his Subadar Major <sup>lvi</sup> never hesitated to remind him about it. There was a lot of pride involved. Binks appreciated the importance of getting a fair number of awards for his battalion. He could see things from the soldier’s point of view. There was an ample measure of literary genes in the Firbank family <sup>lvii</sup> for Binks to draw on, and his recommendations enabled several men in his battalion to obtain gallantry awards during his tenure of command.

As Binks approached Taungup with his battalion, Japanese resistance became more desperate. On 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1945, three companies of 2/7 Rajput, supported by tanks of 146<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps, crossed the Tanlwe Chaung which the Japanese unsuccessfully tried to oppose. From this bridgehead on the south bank, patrols from 13<sup>th</sup> Frontier Force Rifles and 2/Rajput pressed relentlessly forward. <sup>lviii</sup>

“In Burma on 28 Mar 45, N°8 platoon was ordered to hold a position at MAYITKON. At approx. 1930 hours the position came under heavy automatic fire from the North East and East. Under cover of this fire infiltration was attempted but was repulsed by our fire. The enemy again attacked, this time in the platoon HQ area. The platoon commander immediately ordered a counter charge by the five men available. L/Naik <sup>lix</sup> Khan Mohammed [N°1 of the platoon mortar] led the charge firing his pistol and the Japs retired. L/Naik Khan Mohammed then seized a rifle from the Subedar’s <sup>lx</sup> orderly and pursued the enemy, bayoneting three who were seen to fall. Their bodies were recovered at first light. Further enemy activity that night was restricted to sporadic and ineffective grenade discharger and automatic fire. It is considered that this reduced offensive spirit on the part of the enemy was due to the aggressive and courageous action of L/Naik Khan Mohammed, an action well beyond the call of his duty.”

This recommendation, written by Binks in the field on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1945, three days after the action, ultimately resulted in the award of the Military Medal to L/Naik Mohammed Khan. <sup>lxi</sup> Fierce local actions were raging around blocks set up on the narrow road running through broken country leading to Taungup. It was little more than a cart track. “At one point the Japs had felled trees across the track for several hundred yards and were deeply entrenched with machine guns in the steep hillside. A small force of 2/7 Rajput was feeling its way round the back of the hill when suddenly a Jap captain, waving a sword in his right hand and gripping a pistol in his left, leapt from a trench and ran at the company commander. Lance-Naik

Bishram Singh turned his Sten gun on the officer but it jammed. The captain raised his sword to strike the Rajput officer but before he could do so his wrist had been grabbed by Bishram Singh who in a lightning action seized the man's pistol and fired it at him. As the Jap fell dead three more ran up with fixed bayonets. Bishram Singh took the pin from a grenade, ducked behind a tree, threw the grenade – and killed the lot<sup>lxxii</sup>. For these acts of gallantry, Bishram Singh was awarded the Military Medal.<sup>lxxiii</sup>

The Division was itching to get into Taungup. It may not have been a Mandalay or a Rangoon, but it was nevertheless an important objective. It had to be taken before the southwards advance could continue, although not before 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade had cleared the pockets of Japanese resistance which threatened its flanks. Then suddenly, on the night of 13/14<sup>th</sup> April, a strong fighting patrol from 2/7 Rajput forced the Taungup Chaung in the darkness and got into the Taungup perimeter. Not a shot was fired. The Japanese defenders had withdrawn – just half an hour before the Rajputs arrived. But the town was still dominated by Japanese artillery on a hill to the southeast, and could not be occupied until this had been dealt with.

The forward units of the Tiger Head division were by now more than 100 miles further south than any other British troops on the Burma mainland. But they were to go no further. The Allied High Command had earmarked 26<sup>th</sup> Indian Division for another major task. It was to be the spearhead for DRACULA, the operation to capture Rangoon by a combined amphibious and air-born assault.<sup>lxxiv</sup> Thus on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1945, 2/7 Rajput returned to Ramree Island – and then on to India with the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade.<sup>lxxv</sup> In the event, 2/7 Rajput was not employed with 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade for DRACULA. Soon afterwards, yet another opportunity to participate in a major operation was thwarted, this time the sea-borne invasion of the Malaya mainland code-named ZIPPER. The unconditional surrender of Japan was negotiated just days before the assault was scheduled.

But the war was not yet over for the Tiger Head Division – or for 2/7 Rajput. Although all Japanese forces had surrendered, there were still several major problems throughout Southeast Asia, arising directly or indirectly from the cessation of hostilities, which could not be resolved without the employment of military resources. Most problematic for SACSEA [Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia] were the militant freedom movements emerging in the Netherlands East Indies and elsewhere throughout the region. Presented with the need for fast action, the resources immediately at hand were employed. These were mostly Indian and Gurkha units currently in Burma and Malaya, but included 26<sup>th</sup> Indian Division then in India. 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade, which had only just been earmarked to move to Siam in September as part of the deployment of ALFSEA [Allied Land Forces Southeast Asia] for peace keeping duties, was in the event returned to 26<sup>th</sup> Indian Division which it rejoined in Medan, capital of Sumatra, between 30<sup>th</sup> October and 5<sup>th</sup> November 1945. However, it appears that Binks did not accompany the 2/Rajputs to Sumatra<sup>lxxvi</sup>, and it seems most probable that he went on a well-deserved leave after a long period of active service.

## **THE END IN INDIA**

In August 1947 came the great upheaval of Partition, when British India was divided into independent India and Pakistan. The Rajput Regiment was allocated to India, and its Punjabi Mussalmans were transferred to the Pakistan Army, the gap being filled with Gujars, another warrior class from the western United Provinces, southern Punjab and west Rajasthan. The regiment thus maintained, in the military perspective of the time, its high-class northern India

character. Unfortunately for the regular British officers, their long association with the fighting battalions of the Indian Army was at an end. Some transferred to the British Army, others retired.

A select few stayed on during the transitional period to help the armies of the newly independent countries find their own feet, although the executive command of fighting formations had been immediately handed over to local officers. Once again, Binks was invited to take on a training job – this time with the Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun as Commander, Auchinleck Battalion. It was important and rewarding work, but it wasn't much fun. In 1950 he finally left India and retired from active service.

## SINGAPORE

The war years had taken their toll on his health. This, and the sadness of leaving India, accumulated to a heavy burden. Out of place back in England, he turned once more to the east and in 1951 found the perfect job as Commander of the newly created Singapore Civil Defence Corps. It was a serious and useful occupation for which, with his experience in army training, he was well qualified. The Civil Defence programme depended largely upon training and motivating civilian volunteers, although some officers from the army and police force were also involved.<sup>lxvii</sup> There were fresh memories of the Japanese invasion and the setbacks caused by the almost total lack of an organised civil defence force. There was also the threat of the so-called Emergency, an understatement for the communist insurgency which threatened the internal security of Malaya and Singapore. Thus he was able to get on with his work with the reasonable support of both civil and military authorities.<sup>lxviii</sup>

In 1958, Binks handed over the reins of the Civil Defence Corps to Mr Chan Chew Kim, who continued to lead it for two years before it was disbanded in 1960. Always looking for active employment, Binks then managed to engineer a Retired Officer appointment. Taking on board a temporary reduction to Staff Captain, and with more headaches than dealing with a tribal *lashkar*<sup>lxix</sup>, he took charge of the mishmash of administrative problems concerning British officers' family accommodations on the island.

## FINALE

Ultimately there was retirement, and Binks stayed on in Singapore in a breezy bungalow in Katong off the east coast road. At dawn and dusk, well into his eighties, he could be seen jogging along the beach, the silhouette of Batam Island shimmering across the Straits of Singapore, his faithful mongrel Chips trotting along at his heels. The Singapore Polo Club would regularly comb the island to track him down. No-one else could match his competence as referee for the spirited tournaments with visiting Malay States teams.<sup>lxx</sup>

Binks once described himself as a man of no consequence.<sup>lxxi</sup> He had the professional soldier's reticence about discussing his active services. Yet the story of his life paints a different portrait. He was a man who accomplished a great deal in his military career and on the field of sport. When encouraged to do so, he spoke of his personal contribution to the war effort with great modesty. Fighting was a manly contest between warriors – and he spoke of his adversaries with respect. He seemed incapable of thinking badly of anyone, yet within this gentle frame lurked the impetuosity of the cavalry officer and the polo player, the sense of judgement of the ocean sailor, and the tenacity and courage of the frontiersman. These qualities were tempered by a fine intellect and the most generous and kindly disposition.

He risked his life and sacrificed his health in the pursuit of his military duties. He was a warrior, a leader of men, a soldier's soldier. One of the many to whom later generations owe so much and about whom they know so little.

Binks died in Singapore at the age of ninety-one on June 25<sup>th</sup> 1992. <sup>Ixxii</sup>



### SINGAPORE POLO CLUB AUGUST 1960

Frankie Wilson (19<sup>th</sup> Lancers and Queen's Messenger) and Binks Firbank (Sam Browne's Cavalry and HQ Singapore Base District) mucking out Court Jester's stable (Brown Australian Gelding). Orders by Lee Firbank.

#### NOTES & REFERENCES

- <sup>i</sup> Nicknamed 'Binks' by his mother, this remained his sobriquet throughout his life
- <sup>ii</sup> *The Piffer*. The Journal of the Punjab Frontier Force Association. November 1992 edition p.10
- <sup>iii</sup> These improved financial conditions also made marriage a more viable proposition for the younger officers, and Binks married Cynthia Price in 1932. They had two daughters, Anne and Elizabeth.

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- iv *Piffer*, Nov. 1992 p.10
- v *The Daily Telegraph* 31<sup>st</sup> July 1992
- vi *The Straits Times* Singapore 29<sup>th</sup> January 1986, report by Irene Pates of an interview with Col L.T. Firbank
- vii *London Gazette* 20<sup>th</sup> June 1941. Officer of the Military Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire: “In recognition of distinguished services in Waziristan during the period 1<sup>st</sup> January 1940 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1940. Major Leslie Telford Firbank [14999], 8<sup>th</sup> King George V’s Own Light Cavalry, Indian Army”. Mentioned in Despatches. “For distinguished services in Waziristan during the period 1<sup>st</sup> January 1940 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1940”.
- viii The recommendation, submitted by the C-in-C India, is held in the records of the Private Secretary to HE the Viceroy [Honours Branch] under “Honours, Awards & MIDs Connected with Waziristan Operations in 1940” [National Archives of India: file ref.116-H/1941]
- ix P.E. Abbott & J.M.E. Tamplin, *British Gallantry Awards*, London 1981, p.121. The authors cite an amending warrant of 5<sup>th</sup> February 1931, published in the *London Gazette* 20<sup>th</sup> March 1931, clarifying the conditions of the award. It laid down that the DSO was only to be given for “distinguished services under fire or under conditions equivalent to service in actual combat with the enemy.” It was in effect the appropriate award, if any, for B Squadron Commander at Khan Khelan.
- x The wiseacre’s interpretation of the Military Division of the OBE was “Other Buggers Efforts”
- xi “*History of 8<sup>th</sup> King George V’s Own Light Cavalry*”, H.G.Rawlinson, Gale & Polden, Aldershot 1948
- xii The Retreat can be said to have ended on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1942. The last rear guard action of the Retreat was fought from 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> May at Shwegyin astride the Chindwin River. It was in effect the end of the road. The shattered remnant of the Army in Burma was then ferried across the river, leaving most of its equipment behind. In the end it was saved by the weather, and by the very length of the retreat. The monsoon closed in behind the weary soldiers. Further pursuit by the Japanese Army, itself already greatly over-extended, was not a practical possibility.
- xiii General Sir Archibald Wavell, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C., Commander-in-Chief of the Army in India
- xiv *The Arakan Operations 1942-45. Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939-45*, Lieut Col N.N. Madan, edited by B. Prasad, Combined Inter-Services Historical Section [India & Pakistan]. Calcutta 1954. p.20
- xv *The War Against Japan Vol 2. India’s Most Dangerous Hour. History of the Second World War*. UK Military Series. HMSO London 1958. p.357
- xvi C.E. Lucas Phillips, *The Raiders of Arakan*, Heinemann, London 1971. p.13
- xvii *War Against Japan*, Vol. 2 [title page]
- xviii *The Royal Indian Navy. Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939-45*. Combined Inter-Services Historical Section [India & Pakistan], Agra 1964. p.260. The R.I.N. component was part of a landing craft wing force which arrived in Arakan waters in Dec 1943, its strength then being 21<sup>st</sup> L.C.P.L Flotilla [landing craft personnel large] and 42<sup>nd</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> L.C.M Flotillas [landing craft mechanised].
- xix Major Dennis Holmes, 1<sup>st</sup> Punjab Regiment, Indian Army
- xx *Raiders of the Arakan*, p.78
- xxi Brig. W.E.H. Condon OBE, *The Frontier Force Regiment*, Gale & Polden 1962

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- xxii The six Garrison companies were given the numbers 1 to 6, with the regimental number 12 suffixed [i.e. 112 Coy to 612 Coy]. The seventh Infantry company was numbered 85<sup>th</sup> which, maybe because of its different purpose, was out of sequence with the others.
- xxiii C. Kempton, *Register of Titles of Units of the HEIC and Indian Armies 1666 – 1947*. Bristol 1997, p.151. Kempton lists the 85<sup>th</sup> as an Indian Infantry Company, att'd 12 FFR, raised 1943 and disbanded 1946. Although he does not list any 12FFR Garrison Companies, it seems clear that the 112<sup>th</sup> to 612<sup>th</sup> Companies were all Garrison Companies in the accepted definition.
- xxiv The purpose of Force 136, rather like V Force in Burma, was essentially to gather information in enemy occupied territory, to act as the ears and eyes of military intelligence, and to be a catalyst for local resistance.
- xxv *Piffer*, May 1986 p.6. Letter to the editor from J.S.A. Selwyn gives details of the raising of the 85<sup>th</sup> Company, and notes that authority for its raising was GHQ[I] letter No.2385/1/A.G.1 of 30.01.1943.
- xxvi *Piffer*, May 1986 p.7
- xxvii *London Gazette*, 16.11.1944. Awarded the Military Medal for bravery in Burma: 33053 Sepoy Maqbula Khan [a Mohmand Pathan] and Sepoy 34124 Mir Badshah [an Afridi Pathan]. Details of these awards are held in the Public Records Office [War Office and Ministry of Defence section; recommendations for honours & awards; class file WO 373]. An identical recommendation for both awards was submitted by Major J.S.A. Selwyn on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1944 and duly endorsed by Lieut-Gen. W.J. Slim, G.O.C-in-C Fourteenth Army. It involved a daring and successful rescue.  
“85<sup>th</sup> Inf. Coy 12<sup>th</sup> F.F.Regiment. Arakan. On March 6 44 a patrol of this unit, with orders to hold the village DODAN, was attacked in this position by a numerically superior Japanese force. In the ensuing fight, 32552 Havildar Saleh Khan and 32551 Sepoy Mohd Naqi were wounded and carried off prisoners by the Japanese. 33053 Sepoy Maqbula on his own initiative went forward some 300 yards from the patrol's defensive position and established his L.M.G. so as to give covering fire to 34124 Sepoy Mir Badshah who, also going forward, took up a position to intercept the party of four Japanese who were taking away our prisoners. The joint effort of these two Sepoys resulted in the killing of all four Japanese and the rescue of Havildar Saleh Khan and Sepoy Mohd Naqi.”
- xxviii *Register of Titles*, pp.70-78. The Inland Water Transport was an element of the Corps of Indian Engineers under the control of the Quarter Master General [India]. The 290<sup>th</sup> Special Purpose Company was raised in 1943 and disbanded in 1946.
- xxix *Col L.T. Firbank*, personal papers
- xxx *From Trombay to Changi's a helluva way*, O.A. Golden, Andover 1987. The Fairmile Type B craft in 56<sup>th</sup> Flotilla were built in Bombay with teak hulls, with all electrical and mechanical components shipped from the U.K. in kits. They were armed with a 3pdr cannon forward, twin Oerlikon amidships, and Bofors aft. Most RIN MLs carried six depth charges on cradles. The crew was two officers and fourteen ratings.
- xxxi *Col L.T. Firbank*, conversations with author
- xxxii *From Trombay to Changi*, p.78
- xxxiii It seems there is rarely a dull moment on the Naf River. In 1967 Bangladesh and Burma fought a brief battle over an attempt by the latter to build a controversial damn across the Naf. The Burmese relaunched a similar project at the beginning of January 2001 in violation of a 1962 agreement on the river. This led to an exchange of fire between Burma security forces and Bangladesh Rifles border guards operating out of Teknaf. Financial Times 10 Jan 2001.
- xxxiv *Raiders of the Arakan*, p.78-79

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- xxxv Although he was a regular Indian Army officer, Dennis Holmes was the son of a Burma Government civil servant, and he undoubtedly had a good opportunity to develop knowledge and awareness of Burma and its culture.
- xxxvi *From Trombay to Changi*, p.78 See also the amusing watercolour sketch of Binks in naval uniform and gum boots, a telescope under his arm, entitled ‘Admiral of the Naf’.
- xxxvii *Official History: Royal Indian Navy*, p.260
- xxxviii *From Trombay to Changi*, p.78
- xxxix *Col L.T. Firbank*, papers
- xl Major [later Colonel] F.A.H. Wilson. He became a close personal friend of Binks, and a Queen’s Messenger in retirement.
- xli *History of the Second World War. UK Military Series. The War Against Japan. Vol. 3, The Decisive Battles.* HMSO London 1958 p.126
- xlii Alethangyaw, a small village on the coast known by coastal forces as ‘I-Thank-You’. It was a victim of the British Army’s time-honoured anglicization procedure.
- xliii Small country sailing craft
- xliv *Raiders of the Arakan*, p.88
- xlvi *War Against Japan, Vol 3.* p.126
- xlvii *44 Royal Marine Commando, Achnacarry to the Arakan*, Tony Mackenzie, ISBN 1-871085-33-0. p.50
- xlviii *44 Royal Marine Commando*, p.54
- xlvi *44 Royal Marine Commando*, p.47. Nahkaungdo [in local dialect ‘The Short Nosed Village’] was a small and otherwise insignificant island in the Naf River used as a jumping off point for V Force raids. It had been renamed ‘No-Can-Do’ by the Royal Marines.
- xlix *Raiders of the Arakan*, p.167
- l *Raiders of the Arakan*, pp.167 – 173. Lucas Phillips gives a fascinating account of this difficult rescue.
- li These locations are noted, without further detail, in Binks’ personal papers.
- lii *London Gazette*, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1945
- liii The full title of 2/7 Rajput was 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion [Prince Albert Victor’s], 7<sup>th</sup> Rajput Regiment. First raised in 1798 as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Bengal Native Infantry, it was one of the few Bengal Army regiments which remained loyal during the Indian Mutiny. At first disarmed in 1857 as a precautionary measure, this proved to be unnecessary and, after restoration of its arms, the regiment served in the Punjab during 1858-9 with much credit. Following reconstruction of the Indian Army in 1861, it was re-titled 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Bengal Native Infantry, and went on to fight with distinction in Afghanistan, Burma, on the Northwest Frontier, and during World War One in the Mesopotamia theatre. It continued to bear the number 4 through various title changes until 1922 when, as a result of post-WW1 measures to rationalise and modernise the Indian Army, linked infantry regiments were converted into numbered battalions of a single regiment. The 4<sup>th</sup> Prince Albert Victor’s Rajputs then became the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion [Prince Albert Victor’s], 7<sup>th</sup> Rajput Regiment.
- liv It was Lieut. General Bill Slim’s idea that each Indian infantry division should have an emblem, rather than just a number, to give it an identity and help to build a divisional esprit de corps. These emblems were used in uniform on shoulder flashes, on vehicles, stationary, and so on. Others included Dagger,

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Ball of Fire, etc.. Several of the Indian divisions came to be best known by their emblems, such as Tiger Head Division, Golden Arrow Division, Red Eagle Division, and Black Cat Division.

- lv “*Tiger Head. The Story of the 26<sup>th</sup> Indian Division*”; Director of Public Relations, War Department, Government of India; Bombay circa 1945. p.24
- lvi The senior Indian [*Viceroy’s Commissioned*] officer of an Indian Army infantry battalion. Although junior in rank to the most junior British [*King’s Commissioned*] officer, the Subadar Major reported directly to the battalion commander, and was his *confidant* for all matters regarding the day to day running of the battalion. He was invariably a man of great experience and strong personality who carried much influence.
- lvii The noted *avant-garde* writer Ronald Firbank was an uncle. Thomas Firbank, decorated officer of the Airborne Corps [MC for Taranto in southern Italy during September 1943] and well-known author of “I bought a mountain” and other books, was a cousin. Binks invariably referred to him as Tokyo Tom because he had lived for many years in Japan with his third wife, a Samurai lady. The family creative flair was also passed along to a younger generation. Binks’ elder daughter Anne is an accomplished actress of stage and screen, and his younger daughter Elizabeth is a fine musician and professional artist.
- lviii *The Arakan Operations*, p.305
- lix Indian Army infantry rank equivalent to lance corporal in the British army.
- lx Indian [*Viceroy’s Commissioned*] officer equivalent to Captain in the British army
- lxi *Public Records Office, War Office and Ministry of Defence - recommendations for honours & awards.* Class files WO 373. Original recommendation for MM signed “L.T. Firbank OBE, Lieut. Col. Comd. 2/7<sup>th</sup> Rajput Regt. In the field 31 Mar 45”. Endorsement was required at brigade [Brig.J.F.Forman], division Major General H.M.Chambers] and corps [Lieut.General Sir Philip Christison] levels. Final approval was given by Lieut. General Sir Oliver Leese, C-in-C ALFSEA [Allied Land Forces, South East Asia], the King having given his agreement to a limited number of first level gallantry awards being approved by army commanders. The award was announced in the supplement to the “London Gazette” of 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1945.
- lxii *Tiger Head*, p.25
- lxiii *London Gazette*, 2 Aug 45.
- lxiv “*History of the Second World War. The War Against Japan; Vol. 4 The Reconquest of Burma*”, S.W.Kirby et al, HMSO 1965.
- lxv *The Arakan Operations*, p.305
- lxvi This assumption is based upon the fact that Binks’s group of medals does not include the GSM with clasp S.E.Asia 1945-46 for service in Netherlands East Indies [medals with Mrs Lee Firbank]
- lxvii *Straits Times*
- lxviii Amongst his other achievements during this period, Binks was the first member to take a Chinese lady, his second wife Lee whom he had married in 1955, into the Tanglin Club, redoubt of the socially exclusive British community in Singapore. Another bastion stormed.
- lxix A tribal armed force on the warpath along the North Western Frontier of India.
- lxx But he was by no means a recluse. “For many years he was a prominent personage in Singapore life and as such appeared in the TV programme Whicker’s World and the film Saint Jack, an English gentleman from a more gracious age”. *Piffer*, Nov 1992 p.10

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<sup>lxxi</sup> *Straits Times*

<sup>lxxii</sup> The Funeral Service was held at St. Andrew's Cathedral two days later when the address was given by a family friend, the late Roy Bennett, who recalled that, on his last visit to the U.K. in 1989, Binks had attended the closing down ceremony of "The Shop", R.M.A. Woolwich, which, though in failing health, he had been determined not to miss. *Piffer*, Nov 1992 p.18

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