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Burma Revisited

A. Sutherland Brown

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Atholl Sutherland Brown

Nostalgia is in most ways an inappropriate word for the emotions that drew me back to Burma in February 1997.1 had spent 1944 at airfields on the Bengal-Burma frontier as a pilot in the RCAF with 177 Squadron RAF.[1] We flew Bristol Beaufighter twin-engined ground attack fighters with 901 Wing of the Third Tactical Air Force engaged in interdicting the railways, roads and rivers of Burma as well as attacking the Japanese-held airfields.[2] We ranged at low level all over Burma (Myanmar) and northern Siam (Thailand) and, for our small numbers, had a devastating impact on the supply and reinforcement of the Japanese armies.[3] Histories of the Second World War generally ignore the importance of the Burma campaign in which, nevertheless, the largest land battles against the Japanese took place, saving India from the trials of Burma,[4] and liberating Burma itself so that it soon gained independence after hostilities ended. As D-Day veterans return to Normandy I returned to Burma* with the added interest of the availability of its vast archaeological treasures, the charming otherworldliness of the people, the pleasing climate of its cool season and for a view of a country in transition.

To me it was very evocative to see the land I knew so well from a hundred feet or so in the air. Early in my operational life I was briefed to carry out an offensive patrol (rhubarb) in central Burma that carried me close to the 10 to 12th century temple city of Pagan. As a relatively ignorant twenty-year-old I barely knew of its existence. Flying into the brightening dawn there, laid out ahead in bold silhouette, were more than 2,000 exotic temples. I was in a state of disbelief then and I have scarcely changed my view having visited Pagan on the ground for three days on this recent trip. On another plane I was able to visited the Allied War Memorial and Cemetery at Taukkyan near Rangoon (Yangon) as well as the Kranji Memorial at Singapore. On yet another level, perhaps less understandable to non-combatants, I was overwhelmed by visits to what then were Japanese-held airfields we had attacked, sometimes at great cost, and near Pegu I was able to positively identify the site where I destroyed a locomotive and train as we attempted to deprive the Japanese enemy of supplies and reinforcements.

It is difficult to find advice in Canada for travel to Burma. Our Department of Foreign Affairs seems to following the American State Department in recommending no trade or tourist travel to Burma because of human rights abuses and authoritarian government. This in spite of both nation's enthusiasm about travel to China or Indonesia where human rights abuses are of a different order in numbers and kind. Happily, I came across a brochure in Britain for *Silken East*[5] tours that was able to arrange all I wished, and accomplished it with no glitches or disappointments. I travelled by myself with fluent young English-speaking guides and competent drivers; the latter a necessity in the only country in the world that uses right-hand drive vehicles on the right-hand side of the road. There are lots of vehicles in Burma but not many new ones even in Rangoon. However, there are still many Canadian-built Chevrolet trucks that entered Burma with the 14th Army over 50 years ago still running over the rough roads, kept operational by hand-made parts. Many of these have been converted to buses.

Historical Summary of 177 Squadron

177 Squadron, Royal Air Force, whose motto was "Silently into the Midst of Things," was formed in India early in 1943, started operations at Feni in September, and was disbanded at Hathazari, an airfield near Chittagong, in May 1945.[6] All the aircrew flew aircraft to India as part of a program of re-equipping RAF

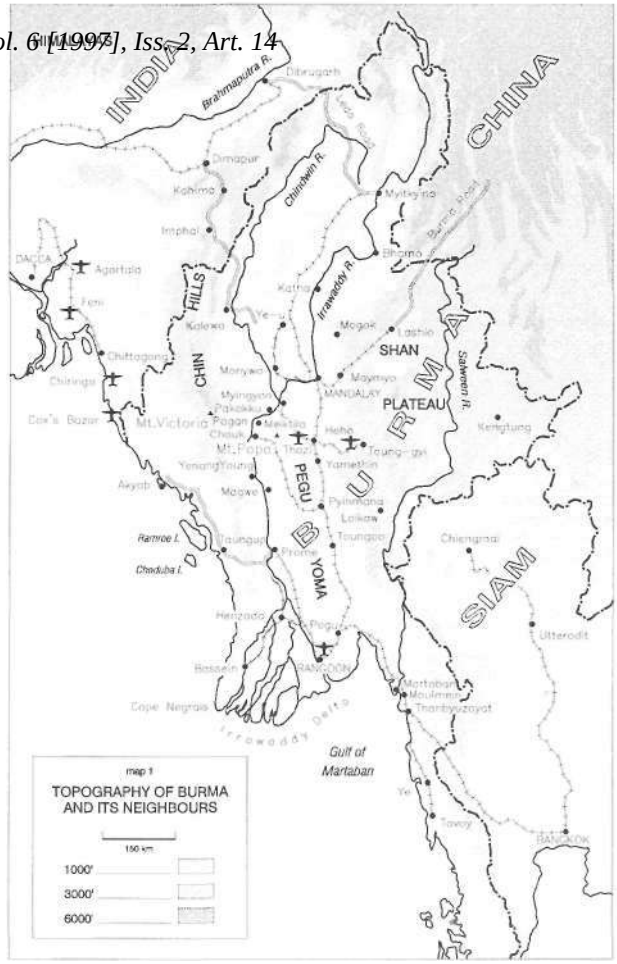
squadrons in India; the groundcrew left the UK late in 1942 by troopship. Neither knew their eventual destination. The Squadron had a difficult and disorganised beginning but after it started operations it was highly effective in its assigned role of ground attack against the Japanese transportation systems and airfields. The strategic situation in Southeast Asia was perilous in 1942-43 but fortunately the Air Force was in fairly good shape by the end of the monsoon in 1943.

The Squadron aircraft ranged all over Burma and northern Siam at low level, singly or in pairs, on sorties that lasted up to seven hours and carried us the equivalent of a flight from the UK to the Adriatic Sea and return. The aircraft were armed with four 20 mm cannons, rockets and a rear -firing Vickers gun in the navigator's dorsal cupola. The Beaus also carried large format cameras in their nose cone that recorded day time attacks as well as being used for intelligence. Navigating at tree-top height over sparsely-featured jungles and plain was difficult. As the Beaufighter attacks started to bite the Japanese were forced to transport men, equipment and supplies mainly at night so the Beaufighter squadrons started intense ground attacks during the two weeks bracketing the full moon.

The enemy defended their transportation corridors by positioning light flak along the railways, on airfields, oil installations and on vehicles travelling in convoys. Their passive defence also made extensive use of camouflage, earth-filled locomotive shelters, short spur lines into jungle cover, and rail car dispersal.

Life for the aircrew and groundcrew at the remote forward airstrips was fairly relaxed but without many diversions. The humid tropical weather, monsoon rains and tropical diseases made life difficult for all which severe losses of aircrew compounded; nevertheless morale was consistently high.

The Squadron started by successfully destroying the large rivercraft which were the main initial means of enemy supply. It then turned to airfield attacks to drive the Japanese out of their forward and central airstrips, at the same time starting intense attacks upon railways in central Burma. As the enemy built up their reserves for two offensives to claim India,



attention was focused on the few jungle roads supplying the Arakan.

The command and many of the Squadron aircrew were colourful and courageous characters, made more so by their circumstances. The senior personnel led by example and invariable good humour in the face of severe casualties. Losses mounted as the Squadron turned to long range targets early in 1944: the new Bangkok railway built by enslaved PoWs, the airfields and roads of northern Siam, and shipping of all sorts in the Gulf of Martaban south of Rangoon. These attacks impacted severely upon the reinforcement of the Japanese forces for their offensives of early 1944 when the 14th Army stood firm against the enemies encircling attacks, before devastating its three Armies in Burma.

177 Squadron withdrew from the line for two months at the start of the 1944 monsoon to rearm and train with rocket-firing Beaufighters. However half of the Squadron was sent at the beginning of August to reinforce the airborne firepower in the besieged enclave of Imphal in the northern Chin Hills. There they flew in appalling weather night and day to attack trains

and motor transport between the Chindwin and Irrawaddy Rivers. Meanwhile the rest of the Squadron returned to the front to be based at a new forward airstrip of Chiringa. At the end of August the Squadron was reunited and started a regimen of intensive attacks in southern Burma and Siam. About the same time many of the surviving aircrew were tour expired and were replaced by new aircrew who quickly became adept at operations provided they survived. In spite of the change the squadron continued much the same, showing its customary dash and courage.

During all this time there were many instances of superb flying skills and courageous actions such as returns on one engine over the mountains from targets 500 miles distant, ditching and survival in stormy monsoon seas for a week, crash landings far in enemy held terrain, and successful evasion and escape by moving through the jungles for three weeks to reach Allied advanced forces.

Early in 1945 the 14th Army broke out onto the plains of Burma and after major battles at Meiktila advanced toward Rangoon. Targets for the Beaufighter crews became restricted to the Irrawaddy delta, the Gulf of Martaban and Siam. A combined operation was planned to land just before the»onset of the monsoon and there was a race between it and the 14th Army to capture Rangoon. Actually the monsoon was early and won the race but then the Burmese war ended in an unexpected and unbelievable manner.

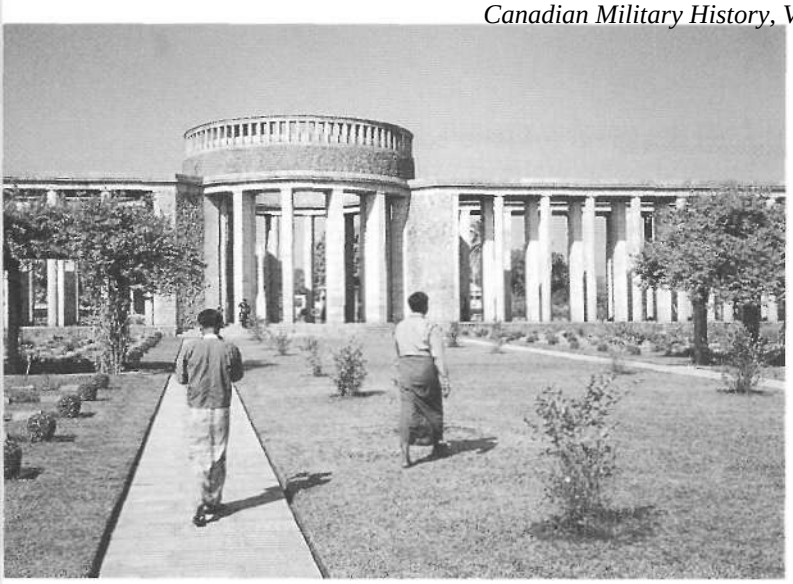
Throughout all this period there were 160 aircrew on the Squadron, 56 of which were missing or killed; in addition seven were incarcerated in the frightful Rangoon Jail. Fourteen of the 77 pilots were Canadians and five of the Canadians went missing. Members of the Squadron were awarded four DSOs, 14 DFCs, two DFMs and an MBE. Two Canadians were awarded DFCs. Praise was heaped on the Squadron but nevertheless it was quickly disbanded when the Burma campaign ended.

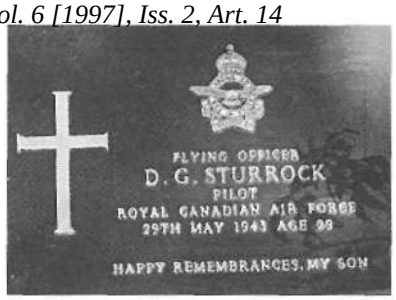
Travels

My travels were mainly confined to the plains of central and southern Burma (Myanmar) with only brief sallies into the hills. The core of Burma is a great lowland comprising the flood plains and deltas of the Irrawaddy-Chindwin and the Sittang river systems with minor low ranges of hills (see Map). The lowlands are bordered on the west by young sedimentary mountains called the Chin Hills that consisted of sharp linear ridges up to 10,000 feet that are the southward termination of the Himalayas, and on the east by an uplifted Shan Plateau of old metamorphic rocks. I visited Rangoon, Pegu (Bago), Mandalay, Monywa, Pagan (Bagan), Mount Popa, Prome (Pyay) and flew over Meiktila with its group of airfields, the site of one of the decisive battles of the campaign.

While in Rangoon I visited Taukkyan Allied War Memorial and Cemetery near Mingalodon Airport (Figure 1). The cemetery is a well-maintained, attractive and peaceful place but is used by local people as something like a park. Ten of our aircrew rest there including three Canadian pilots (Figures 2, 3 and 4). Their headstones are not grouped and there appears to be no ready key to locations; however, a young gardener lead me to their plots as I had a list of grave numbers. A few of our aircrew killed near our bases in the Arakan on the Bay of Bengal are buried at Chittagong. The rest of our missing have no graves or headstones that I am aware of but their names are engraved on the walls of the large Memorial at Kranji Cemetery in Singapore. The crew of the Dakota missing in 1945 from 435 RCAF Squadron that were recently recovered were buried at Taukkyan a few days after I was there but I did not know of the ceremony.

Seven of our aircrew including W/C J.E.S. Hill, one of our Commanding Officers, were found to be in the appalling Rangoon Jail when the city was freed. Unlike the army PoWs the aircrew prisoners were treated as war criminals and no information about their survival was known to the Allied authorities, their relatives or the Red Cross. Their life in the jail was degrading and cruel; they were virtually starving and most suffered from beri beri and dysentery. The *opera bouffe* of the end of Japanese occupation of Rangoon is a story in itself[7] It is sufficient to say the acting C / O of 177 Squadron took the picture of the jail that spelled out "Japs Gone" on one roof and "Brits Here" on another. No immediate action was taken by the Allies presumably because South East Asia Command





Figures 1-4:
Taukkyan Memorial and Cemetery near Rangoon with my *guide on the path and the head gardener on the grass; Close-ups of the headstones*

HQ thought the messages might be a ruse. The prisoners then wrote "Extract Digit," true RAF argot, confirming the Japanese military had left. Rangoon was actually taken by the prisoners and by a Mosquito crew that crash landed on the potholed runway.

I went in search of the site of the infamous Rangoon jail which was close to downtown and the old city hospital, but it had recently been torn down and re-developed so that is hard to find any trace of it or its massive walls. A jail of similar plan of radiating blocks in a semicircle array has recently been built in Mandalay.

The wartime Japanese-held airfields that I saw on my Burma journey included Mingalodon and Hamabi near Rangoon, Meiktila southwest of Mandalay, Magwe and Prome on the Irrawaddy. Meiktila I only saw from the air and Hamabi is an active Myanmar Air Force base that is out of bounds to visitors. There is an army presence at the other fields and one is not supposed to take photographs. I did not travel to the Shan plateau or Thailand so I did not see Aungban, Heho or Chengmai. We had repeatedly attacked all these fields at low level, sometimes at considerable cost to ourselves from flak or by Army 01 (Oscar) single-engined fighters. We also destroyed a number of aircraft on the ground but more importantly we drove the enemy out of their forward airstrips, and made using the eastern ones so risky that they brought aircraft up only for specific operations. This was how complete mastery of the air was achieved that allowed the 14th Army to supply and move complete Divisions by air.

The airfields I did see did not look familiar. There were no revetments, dispersal tarmacs or gun emplacements evident, and in some cases the towns have encroached on the fields. Magwe looked the most familiar.

Some of our riskiest targets were the Yenangyaung oil fields along the Irrawaddy for they were defended by both intense light and heavy flak. In contrast, the pipeline to Rangoon was poorly defended and if you could spot a place where it crossed a creek it was an easy target.[8] The oilfields have been very productive and continues to operate using ancient technology. To visit them is to step back to the 1920s in California with a forest of closely-spaced permanent derricks (Figure 5).

Transportation was our main target; river and seagoing ships, motor vehicles convoys, and especially trains. The old mail steamers were all sunk by our Wing soon after we started operations. There is nothing like them at present on the rivers but there is still much traffic; lots of small freight boats, ferries, fishing boats and some small cruise boats between Mandalay and Pagan.

During the war the railways were under constant attack, day and night, particularly by the Beaufighter squadrons with our heavy armament and shooting accuracy. The enemy railway system was reduced to operating by night and even then was under attack during the moon period and at dusk and dawn. Neither the active nor the passive defences deterred the Beaufighter attacks so that by the end of the campaign the Japanese transportation routes were in tatters. The enemy offensive against India went ahead

Figure 5: *Yenangyaung oilfield today from the highway; still producing and, like California of the 1920s, from closely-spaced permanent derricks;* ***Figure 6.*** *First attack on a locomotive near Pyinbongyi (Payagi) north of Pegu at last light, 27 November 1944;* ***Figure 7:*** *Second attack on train with the village of Pyinbongyi with its stupa (pagoda-like temple) in the background;* ***Figure 8:*** *Diesel locomotive and train approaching Pyinbongyi today (February 1997) with the same setting of stupa, village trees, orientation and water-filled ditch.*

recklessly despite severe shortages of troops and supplies caused by the interdiction of transportation and the inadequacy of the Bangkok railway. This forced the Japanese command to insist upon the capture of Imphal and its caches of supplies, tying them to an objective they were not able to accomplish and to abandon their typical encircling movements.

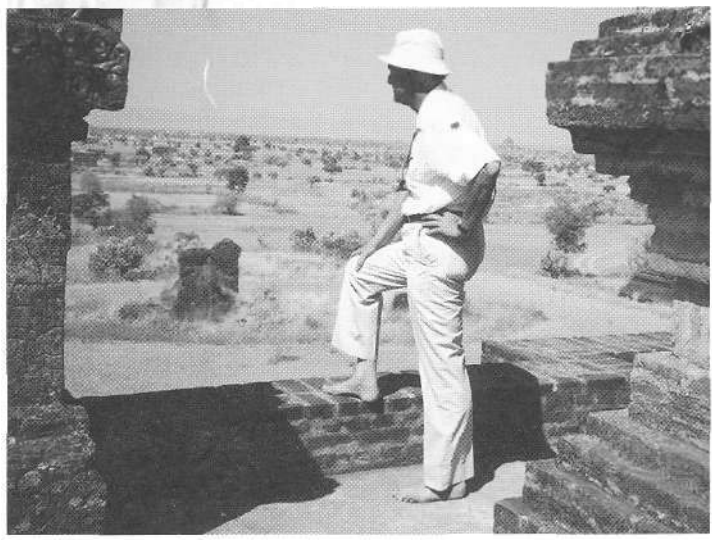
The easiest place for me to visit a site where I had attacked a train was fairly close to Rangoon and just north of Pegu. I journeyed to the village

of Pyanbongyi (Payagyi) where I had severely damaged a locomotive and train in open rice paddy country at dusk on 27 November 1944.[9] The locomotive was riddled with cannon shells, emitting copious steam and coasted to a stop in about three miles. The freight cars of the train were raked with cannon shells. The site of the attack was easily recognized by the design of the temple stupa in the village, the orientation of the railroad relative to the treed environs and water-filled side ditches. As I stood on the tracks a Chinese-built diesel logging train happened along and I got a picture similar to my attack photograph. The three photographs (Figures 8, 9, and 10) show the first two attacks at last light and the modern counterpoint.

The Burma campaign was meagrely supported by the Allied high commands at the time, and history has given it scant attention. The air war in particular has been largely ignored,[10] and the dramatic impact of the three Beaufighter squadrons in staunching the flow of supplies and men to the battles was little recognized even in Southeast Asia Command or by the 14th Army.[11] The army was able to see the effectiveness of the Spits and Hurribombers operating in front of them but the Beaufighter attacks were 500 or more miles behind the front, more like strategic than tactical operations. Regardless, 901 Wing carried out its duty with great effectiveness against a determined, stubborn and well-armed foe. It was to see the sites of our lonely victories and isolated losses that really drew me back to Burma.

Figure 9 *{left): A. Sutherland Brown, Bombay, March 1945.*

Figure 10 *(below): The author with requisite bare feet in Feburary 1997 on a temple platform at the east of the Pagan temple field.*



Notes

1. A. Sutherland Brown, "Indian Days and Burmese Nights: Flying Beaufighters in Southeast Asia with 177 RAF Squadron," *Canadian Military History,* Volume 4, Number 2, pp.9-22.
2. Atholl Sutherland Brown, *Silently into the Midst of Things, 177 Squadron Royal Air Force in Burma, 1943-1945, History and Personal Narratives* (Sussex, UK: The Book Guild Ltd., 1997).
3. Clifford Kinvig, *The River Kwai Railroad* (London: Brassey's, 1992), pp. 175-177.
4. Thakin Nu, *Burma Under the Japanese* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd.)
5. Silken East tours, 36c Sisters Avenue, London, SW11 5SQ, UK; Tel/Fax 0171 223 8987.
6. Brown, *Silently into the Midst of Things.*
7. Lionel Hudson, *The Rats of Rangoon* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987), and Brown, *Silently into the Midst of Things.*
8. Brown, "Indian Days," p. 20.
9. *Ibid,* pp.16 & 20.
10. Henry Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force* (London: Brassey's, 1995).
11. William Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (London: Cassell and Company Ltd, 1956).

After the war, Mr. Sutherland Brown earned a Ph.D. in Geology at Princeton University and subsequently worked as the Chief Geologist on the British Columbia Geological Survey. Now retired, and his history of 177 Squadron and the air war in Burma, *Silently into the Midst of Things: 177 Squadron Royal Air Force in Burma, 1943-1945, History and Personal Narratives* (Sussex, England: The Book Guild Ltd., 1997), has recently been published.