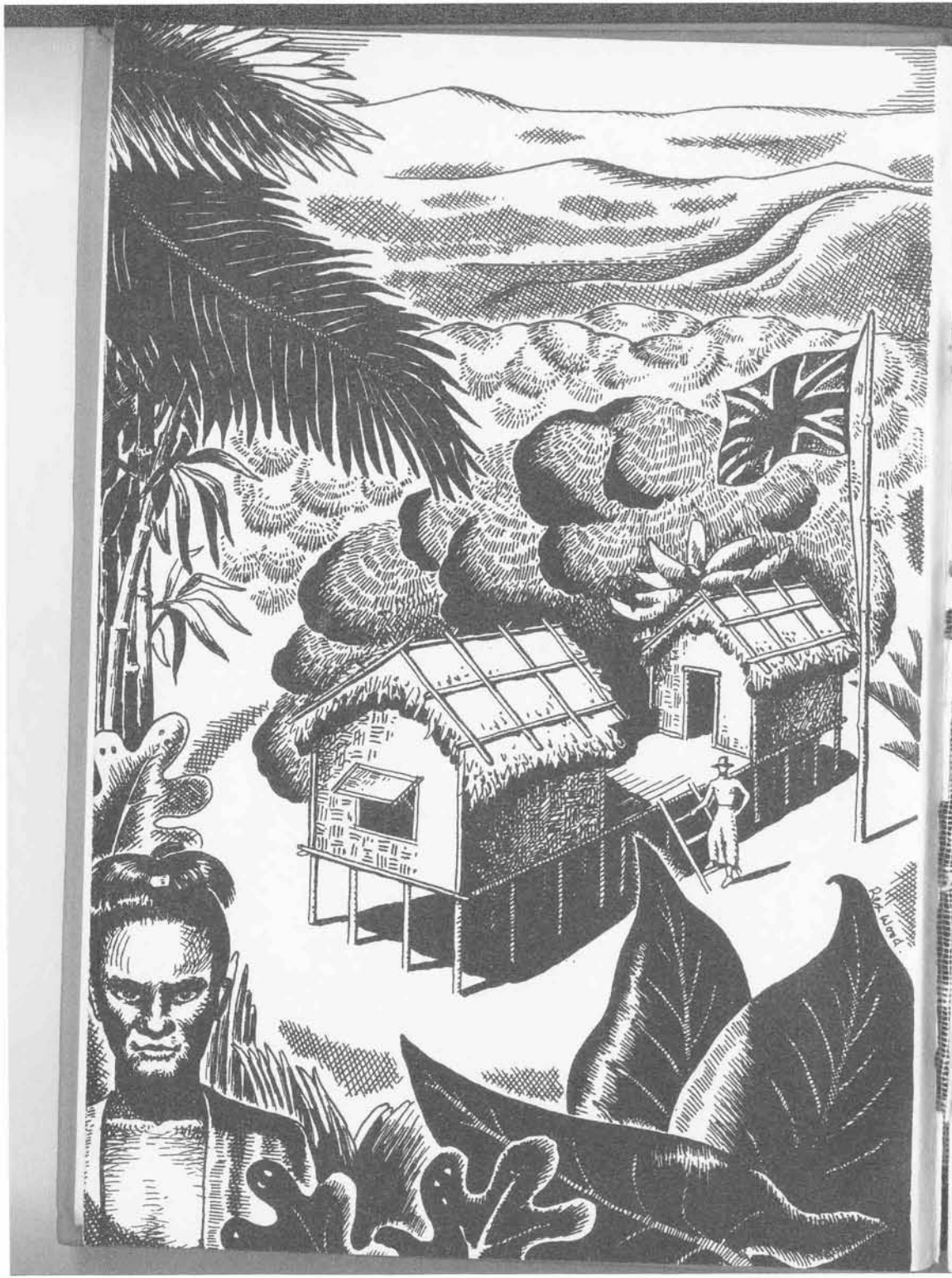

BURMESE OUTPOST

by

ANTHONY IRWIN

Collins
14 ST. JAMES'S PLACE LONDON
1945

Frontispiece: BURMESE OUTPOST

civilised Patriots who dictated my duties to me for the first months or so.

I had been in Teknaf four weeks when Frank came down to see me. He had come to do a pretty unpleasant job and had hoped that I would come with him but when he arrived at my hut, unexpectedly, he found me laid out with dysentery, having managed over the few weeks that I had been in the country to lose two stone in weight. He would not let me come with him but told me what he hoped to do.

About twenty miles behind the Jap lines there lived a local of considerable importance. The enemy thought as much of him as we did and employed him as local Headman for an area which embraced thirty towns and villages. Frank had written to him, but he did not reply. He wanted him to work for us, and what Frank wants he generally gets. So he got into a sampan and rowed across the two miles of water that separated us from the enemy, and in broad daylight paid the gentleman a call. As I watched him go, dressed in a bright red lungyi, blue and white striped shirt, a little white Mussulman hat on his head and a tattered umbrella which hardly covered the Tommy-gun it was meant to hide, I never doubted for a moment that he would come back. He did come back, about 24 hours later, having met the man and received written promise from him of future help. He said little enough about the trip, except that the man had not been at home when he arrived and he had to sit and wait for hours for him. It must have been a highly entertaining wait, for there lay a reserve company of Japs within a mile of him. Actually his first words to me were " How're the squitters ? " and his first action was to have me unceremoniously bundled into hospital. The next time I saw him was a few weeks later, on leave. He had been playing poker with a Maharaja and had relieved him of a thousand rupees.

Of course I met all the types and castes of locals that we had working for us. As the area then occupied by us was almost entirely Mussulman country, it was from the followers of Mohammed that we drew most of our " Scouts " and Agents. The Arakan before the war had been occupied over its entire length by both Mussulman and Maugh. Then in 1941 the two

sects set to and fought. The result of this " War " was roughly that the Maugh took over the Southern half of the country and the Mussulman the Northern. Whilst it lasted it was a pretty bloody affair. Where the Maugh predominated whole villages of Moslems were put to the sword, and vice versa. My present gun-boy, a Mussulman who lived near to Buthjedaung, claims to have killed two hundred Maughs. For weapons they used a great two-handed Dahs, with a blade in some cases four feet long. At first the Maughs had it all their own way, for they were both better organised and better armed, having a fair sprinkling of rifles. But as they pushed North, so they met up against stiffer and more organised resistance and were not only held, but forced to retreat, for they are, man to man, no match for the Mussulman Arakanese. The immediate result to us was that it separated the two peoples into two distinct areas of influence, and it is on these areas that we have to base our whole system of intelligence, and the Jap likewise, for he uses or tries to use the Maughs in the same way as we use the Mussulmen, but fortunately not to the same effect. Added to the fact that the Mussulmen are the more trustworthy and in my opinion the more courageous, is the point that at the moment the Jap has had to fight in an area the Northern section of which is entirely Moslem. We can work in the full knowledge that nine out of ten men in our sector are for us, and that if we ever see a Maugh, he is against us by force of circumstances beyond his control.

I have come to love and respect these Mussulmen. They are liars ' par excellence ' and are out for what they can get. But who is to blame them ; they've done us well enough. They have had to put up with two British withdrawals, and yet they have come back with us and fought, and died with and for us. I sometimes wonder if any other people in like circumstances can tell the same story of loyalty and patience as can these Mussulman Arakanese.

Since I've been with The Force I have taken part in patrol scraps in which these untrained, unarmed and unenlisted ' Scouts ' have stuck by till the end, whilst others, trained, armed, enlisted and proud, have run. They are generally known as

Bengalis or Chittagonians, quite incorrectly, and to look at they are quite unlike any other product of India or Burma that I have seen. They resemble the Arab in name, in dress and in habit. The women, and more particularly the young girls, have a distinctive Arab touch about them. They wear bright red shawls and drapes, and hide their faces from the Unbeliever. They are ringed through the nose and bangled, and have long, straight black hair. As a race they have been here for over two hundred years, coming at first in twos and threes in the days when the Northern boundaries of the Arakanese Empire lay along the southern edge of Portuguese influence and Siam and Burma both brought subject gifts to the Arakan King. They are a hardy and diligent people and not the lazy worker that casual acquaintances dub them. They are desperately untidy in their homes and in their sanitation, as judged by our standards, but compared with their equals from Bengal proper, they are spotless. Their hardiness is broadcast by the fact that 30 per cent of the deck hands of the British Merchantile Marine are Lascars, many of whom hail from this part of the world. I have seen an old man crawl into my hospital with legs long useless as a result of sores that went an inch deep and spread many inches in diameter. He had not come for help, in his ignorance, until his feet would no longer stand him, as he had work to do, and rice to reap. I had a boy come to me with a deep wound, caused by a bull, the night before. The wound must have been at least ten inches in length and the bone could be seen. He had put cow dung and leaves on it and walked fifteen miles to see me. But once they are under proper care they become the world's worst patients. This lad we stitched up and told to stay in bed. I arranged for his food to be brought to him, yet come meal time, he would be up and hobbling down to the bazaar to get his own. On his return, his leg would naturally hurt, and he would set up a moan that could be heard for miles. The first time I came to him and tried to ease the pain, but the second time I sent my boy to tell him that I was out. He at once stopped his howling only to start up again an hour later when he heard me calling for tea.

Another difficulty is trying to get them to believe that a

particularly hard go of fever need not be, and nine times out of ten, is not, fatal. They get it into their fat heads that they are going to die, and it's easier to shift a mountain than it is to get this idea squashed to their satisfaction. If they really manage to convince themselves that they are going to die, no power on earth can prevent it. I remember an uncle of mine telling me about four days, early in the war, that he had spent in an open boat in the middle of the Atlantic. In the boat were about thirty Lascars. They made no complaint, save every now and then a couple of them would shrug their shoulders and die, rather than face the uncertainty and pain of the near future. They died without a whimper, but with so complete a defeat that was terrible to see. On the fourth day a rescue ship was sighted and hope came to them. With this hope came more yells and moans and complaints from the surviving Lascars than there had been over the three previous and hopeless days. When there is no hope in their hearts, and pain in their bodies that they believe to be incurable, they are quiet and of unique patience. When they think there is the slightest hope, and when they feel that a doctor is by to cure them, they become intolerable and helpless.

Ever since I have been down here, I have had to fight with the Army over these Mussulman Arakanese. The Army looks upon them as coolies, as cowards, and is happy to use the word "locals" with a depth of scorn. From the view point of the outsider looking in, this is perhaps a natural characterisation. Certainly these people are frightened of the unknown, as is every backward race. They are naturally suspicious and superstitious. They do not band together in clans but keep to their homes and their small villages, and thus their real fighting strength is unknown. But were they to get together, were they to be regimented and trained, I would go so far as to say that I would as soon take a battalion of them into the fighting line as any other Native Battalion that I've seen or fought with.

They are living in a hostile country, and have been for hundreds of years, and yet they survive. They are perhaps to be compared with the Jews. A nation within a nation, and the apple tree hating the growth of the mistletoe but not being able to destroy it. They are stoic to a degree. No amount of bullying

will make them talk against their will. Bully them and they will shut up like clams. Be kind to them and treat them as human beings and they will prove loyal and intensely hospitable. They laugh a great deal, and wrestle and disport themselves in the cool of the evening. They are cruel in many ways to their animals, but it is the cruelty of a simple people and a bigoted religion. When they kill for food, they cut the throat and let the animal bleed to death. Sometimes death will take half an hour to come to a large bull.

As the war drags on they become less particular in their methods. Often I have shot a bird dead on the wing, and they have run to collect it, and dragging at its lifeless throat have severed the main vein in order to appease their religious scruples.

By some astonishing method, they can tell a Jap from a British aircraft long before I, with five years of war behind me. I send them to watch a Jap road and they will come back and be able to tell the number of vehicles and whether they are old British captured stuff or Japanese proper. No gun worries them, nor any shot, so long as they feel that it is not aimed at them, and they will only feel this if they are actively employed as an integral part in a battle. They love to dress up like us, and to use our kit. If they can find an old civilian trilby hat they wear it, or an old useless mosquito net they use it. Some of my Scouts wear old machine-gun belts round their bellies, others rifle slings. Some wear topees, long since battered out of shape and use by old age and rain. They will go for miles in complete agony, wearing boots, to be like the Sepoys. One man once had his hand shaken by a general, and from that day has always worn about three rows of medals, some upside down, some back to front and obtained from God knows where. It is fortunate that they have never seen a highland regiment, for had they, their lungyis would be worn above their knees.

As scroungers they are second to none. A battle over and a flood of chaps will be into my hut with rifles, tin hats, pistols, even wireless sets. If they see a British soldier lying wounded and lost in the jungle, they will get him in somehow. If they see a Jap body, they will cut off the head and proudly bring it to me, demanding Backsheesh.

Without these people we would have been blind and deaf. With them we have eyes and ears and continual entertainment. They make wonderful material for the fair-minded and farseeing coloniser. They make equally good material for the grabbing, selfish and dishonest moneymaker. Their future is in our hands. We have a chance of making a happy people and a fair state out of the Arakan. Any fairness, any kindness will be repaid us one hundred fold. I wonder very often whether the fairness and help that they have shown us will be repaid as fully as it would have been had the boot been on the other foot.

§

John, a new arrival to The Force, and I have just returned from a fishing trip. Running along the Eastern edge of my house is the great Kalapanzin River. It abounds with fish of every breed and size, or at least it did until we came into the area. For the last fortnight we have been up and down the river, blowing up the fish with gun-cotton, to help the units around us supplement their rations. Yesterday we cleared the last of the good reaches in the safety zone and to-day we were asked to supply a mess for the occasion of the visit of some big bug. Our reputation at stake, we went out about an hour before dusk, armed with tommy guns and slabs of gun-cotton. The tide being on the make, there was no fear of the fish floating into enemy water, for the enemy were less than eight hundred yards away down stream. We arrived at the chosen spot, with our swimmers girding up their lungyis, and were just about to light the first fuse when there was a crash away to the East, followed by that unpleasant, yet safe, long whistle as the shell passed over our heads to fall three hundred yards over. I thought at once of calling it a day, and making for home, but John would have none of it—" Must save face, Anthony," so with unsteady hands I lit the taper and flung the slab into the pool below us. Before the spark had reached the detonator, another crash sent the parrots wheeling madly, and again the long whistle. The crump that followed coincided with the explosion