



# The Burma Campaign



The Second World War was a worldwide conflict and Canadians served around the globe. One of the lesser-known areas where Canadians made a contribution was in the Asian countries of India and Burma. Approximately 8,000 Canadians served in this area during what became known as the Burma Campaign.

## CANADIANS ON THE GROUND AND AT SEA

The Canadian Army's best-known effort in Asia during the war was the defence of Hong Kong. Canadian soldiers, however, were present in different areas of the region as the fighting progressed. The British 14<sup>th</sup> Army in India and Burma was under the command of General William Slim and some Canadians served in its British and Indian units with infantry and armoured regiments. A number of medical officers served with the India Medical Service as well.

Major Charles Hoey, VC. VAC image



Of the individual Canadians who served with the British Army in Southeast Asia, the achievements of Major Charles Hoey stand out. He grew up in British Columbia before going to Great Britain to enlist in the British Army in 1933. Major Hoey earned a Victoria Cross (the highest award for military valour) in Burma for his heroic leadership in the clearing of an enemy strong point in February 1944. Despite serious wounds, he continued with the attack and single-handedly eliminated a Japanese machine-

gun position which was preventing his troops from advancing. Sadly, Hoey died during this effort.

Canadians were also involved in other special groups in the region, such as the "Sea Reconnaissance Unit," a group of frogmen (military divers) who spearheaded the British Army's assaults across the rivers of Burma. Canadian Lieutenant-Commander B.S. Wright led the unit and another Canadian, Flight Lieutenant G.H. Avery, earned the first Military Cross ever awarded to a frogman for bravery in combat. Avery received this honour for his efforts during the assault that crossed Burma's Irrawaddy River in February and March 1945.

Although not present in the great numbers that plied the North Atlantic, Canadians also served on Canadian and Allied Merchant Navy D.E.M.S. (Defensively-Equipped Merchant Ships) crossing the waters of the Indian Ocean.

One of the most unusual Canadian contributions was their role as "mule skimmers," escorting shiploads of mules from North America to the jungles of eastern India and western Burma. The mules were much needed by the Allied forces fighting there to help transport supplies across the mountainous terrain. In all, about 180 Canadians (many of them members of the Veterans' Guard of Canada) made the long journey, escorting approximately 1,600 mules.

Canadian crew members of RAF No. 159 night bomber squadron. DND, PL-60366.



## CANADIANS IN THE AIR

Most Canadians who served in Asia during the Second World War were members of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), although most of them served with squadrons of the British Royal Air Force (RAF). Their duties were varied and dangerous. The Japanese, while having lost their air superiority as the war progressed, were definitely still a threat. Being shot down over the dense jungle made survival difficult. Allied air efforts were often undertaken even during the five monsoon months of the year that occur in that part of Asia—a wet season that gets as much as five metres of rain. In addition, landing and taking-off on the primitive airstrips was difficult. This sometimes resulted in ground-looping (having the aircraft's tail section quickly swing around), which often damaged the aircraft and resulted in a black mark in the pilot's log book.

## OVER THE INDIAN OCEAN

Nos. 413, 435 and 436 RCAF Squadrons saw service in South and Southeast Asia during the war. No. 413 Squadron was posted to Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka) on 28 March 1942, and took up reconnaissance, convoy-protection and anti-submarine warfare duties over the Indian Ocean. This was the first Canadian unit assigned to this theatre of action. They flew Catalina (or "Canso") flying boats—large amphibious planes that could take off and land on the water. This force had an immediate and decisive role in defending Ceylon against a Japanese attack. Just days after arriving in the region, Canadian Squadron Leader Leonard Birchall and his crew were 600 kilometres south of Ceylon when they spotted Japanese ships. They were attacked and shot down, but not before they had radioed a warning back to base. This alert helped the Allies successfully defend the island from a surprise attack. Birchall was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Sir Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, dubbed him "the Saviour of Ceylon."

RCAF Catalina flying boat under repair in Ceylon in 1942.  
DND, PL10007.

These flying boats spent countless hours over the Indian Ocean on exhausting anti-submarine patrols and search-and-rescue missions during the war. With the ocean so vast and the number of enemy submarines relatively few, submarine sightings were very rare but many sailors whose ships had been attacked and sunk owed their lives to the Canadian aircraft which would find the men and circle over them until they could be rescued.

## THE DAKOTAS

In 1944, the Allies began the campaign to push the occupying Japanese out of eastern India and Burma. This was not an easy task as much of the region was mountainous and covered with jungle. With no roads existing in the area to transport supplies, British General Sir William Slim had to find another way to keep the Allied forces supplied; his solution was to supply an entire army from the air.

The RCAF helped meet this vital need with Nos. 435 and 436 Squadrons, two medium-range transport squadrons based in India which flew their first operational missions in December 1944 and January 1945. The squadrons were comprised of C47 Dakota transport aircraft (the military version of the Douglas DC 3). The "Dak," as it was affectionately called, was tough, reliable, extremely stable and able to take considerable punishment from ground fire. It was also designed for maximum crew safety in the event of a crash.

These planes were usually employed to fly from bases in India and Burma to drop supplies by parachute into small clearings where the materials could be collected by the Allied forces fighting in the area. Later, the planes would land on primitive airstrips built by military engineers. Operating in this kind of terrain often meant steep descents and approaches. Sometimes the planes' ground crews would go along to act as "kickers" helping to push the supplies out the side doors.



The men of Nos. 435 and 436 RCAF Squadrons endured considerable hardships. They also had to work out of airbases with deplorable living conditions. Even their tools were inadequate; they used flashlights and coins to remove cowlings and, with make-shift tools like these, accomplished the impossible and kept the planes flying.

By the end of February 1945, 14 Allied transport squadrons were operational in the air supply effort— four British squadrons (including 225 Canadian aircrew), two Canadian squadrons (consisting of about 300 aircrew and 600 ground crew each) and eight American squadrons—carrying 90 percent of the supplies required by 300,000 men.

The Canadian squadrons worked tirelessly until they returned to Britain in the fall of 1945. No. 435 Squadron flew nearly 30,000 operational hours and delivered more than 27,000 tons of cargo and approximately 15,000 passengers and wounded. Meanwhile, No. 436 Squadron flew almost 32,000 operational hours and delivered almost 29,000 tons of cargo and more than 12,500 passengers and wounded.

## THE BURMA BOMBERS

The RAF found that the American B-24 Liberator was an effective long-range aircraft in East Asia, and soon had several squadrons of the huge planes operating on bombing, long-range patrol and supply missions. Many men in these units came from the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan's No. 5 Operational Training Unit in British Columbia and many of the aircrew on these planes were Canadian. To this day, these Veterans refer to themselves as the "Burma Bombers."

The missions these men flew were varied; the bombers flew on solo and group missions, both by day and by night. The Liberators were often filled with tons of bombs and had crews of up to 11 men. They attacked such targets as railways, ships, bridges and enemy troop concentrations. They flew against enemy targets in Rangoon, the capital of Burma—a city heavily

defended by the Japanese occupiers with flak and fighter planes. They operated from a number of airfields in places like India, Ceylon, and the Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean. The Japanese kept fighting until the end and therefore the Burma Bombers faced danger until the final days of the war.

The men who flew on these missions faced many challenges, and the lengthy duration of the sorties was often a considerable hurdle. Sometimes these planes would have to carry two sets of flight crew because the flights were longer than one crew could safely manage. Liberators of No. 222 Group, RAF, (with 372 Canadian aircrew on strength in March 1945) undertook a series of long-range bombing and mine-laying operations that took them as far afield as Sumatra, Indonesia, in an effort to supply Allied forces and disrupt Japanese shipping.

## FIGHTER AND FIGHTER-BOMBER SQUADRONS

Canadians also served in other capacities in the skies over Asia. Some of the most dangerous roles were those of the fighter pilots who defended against enemy air attack and pursued Japanese targets. Canadians piloted Hawker Hurricanes and Supermarine Spitfires, Thunderbolts, Beaufighters, Mohawks and other fighter planes in combat missions over Burma, eastern India and other areas of the region. Canadian airmen shot down Japanese bombers and fighter planes, as well as undertook reconnaissance duties and pinpoint bombing and strafing efforts on such enemy targets as trains, pipelines, roads, ships and airfields. Often the demanding low-level flight, harsh terrain and unpredictable weather took as great a toll on the men as did the enemy. As well, downed pilots could often expect no mercy if they were captured, creating an extra level of tension.

In the pivotal Battle of Kohima, fighter squadrons and Hawker Hurricane fighter-bomber squadrons with their 20 mm cannons and 115 kilogram bombs were used to strike at enemy strong points and heavy concentrations of enemy troops



who were threatening to overrun Allied positions. During the fighting, the notorious monsoon rains began to fall which made the movement of men and equipment even more difficult. Fighter squadrons had to be moved to less convenient locations in order to prevent aircraft and personnel from being bogged down in the mud. While the dangers faced by these airmen were different than those faced by the troops on the ground, it was still extremely difficult. The critical nature of the battle meant that pilots had to fly in weather that, in normal times, would have kept the planes grounded. Due to the perseverance of the Allied forces, the Japanese Army was defeated and a full-scale invasion of India was averted.

Fighter squadrons were also active along the Arakon coast in the western part of Burma in support of 15<sup>th</sup> Corps of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. Most sorties involved close army support and were very challenging because of the dense tree cover that made targets difficult to see, coupled with the Japanese skills in camouflaging their supply lines with tree branches. Searching out and destroying hidden enemy targets often involved flying less than 10 metres above the jungle treetops.

## SUPPORTING THE “CHINDITS”

The “Chindits” were members of the 77<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade and part of the largest Special Services operation of the war. This unit’s unique nickname was derived from the word for the mythical Burmese beasts that guarded the Buddhist temples in the country. Largely composed of British Indian infantry troops who undertook long-range operations behind enemy lines in Japanese-occupied Burma, a number of

Canadians were involved with the Chindits as the aircrew of some planes supplying the force, air force liaison officers, and radio communications personnel. One of the Chindits’ boldest initiatives consisted of opening up primitive but semi-permanent Allied air bases behind enemy lines in the jungles of occupied Burma. The troops and supplies transported into these bases helped the Allies disrupt Japanese activities in Burma.

## CANADIAN RADAR OPERATORS

A very important, but little-known, Canadian contribution to the Allied effort during the Second World War centred on radar. At the outbreak of the war, radar was still a new technology but it would play a vital role as the distant detection of aircraft and ships now became possible. Finding qualified radar operators was a challenge and the British had an urgent need for skilled personnel. They turned to Canada which had good electronics training programs in place and many Canadians with expertise in the field joined the RCAF and served all over the world. Some of these Canadian radar operators were stationed in Asia even before the Japanese and Allies began fighting in December 1941.

These radar personnel served with fighter squadrons, transport squadrons, maintenance units and both fixed and mobile ground-based stations. It is estimated that more than 700 Canadian radar personnel served in South and Southeast Asia by the end of the war, operating and maintaining their radar equipment in places like Burma, India, Singapore, Ceylon and China.



## AN UNEXPECTED END

As the war in Europe neared an end in early 1945, Allied planning focussed more fully on defeating the Japanese in the East. As the tide turned against Japan, they were pushed from Burma by the summer of 1945. However, the Japanese showed no sign of giving up, despite the fact that the Allies had almost complete control of the sea and air. It was thought that the only way to bring the war in Asia to an end was to invade the Japanese home islands and force a total surrender.

Ambitious plans had been made for Canada's expected role in the Allied push to defeat Japan. As it turned out, they never had to be carried out, with the American dropping of the two atomic bombs on Japan forcing them to surrender unconditionally on 15 August 1945. This date was called V-J (Victory over Japan) Day and finally marked the end to almost six long years of war.

## SACRIFICE

The challenges faced by Canadians who served in Burma were varied, but all had to deal with harsh terrain, great heat and humidity, unfamiliar cultures, threat of enemy attack and dangerous tropical diseases and wildlife very different from anything they ever had to deal with back home.

The lasting impact of the Burma Campaign on Canadians still echoes. One Canadian Dakota disappeared on a mission

in the final days of the war. No proof of what had happened would emerge until some 50 years later when a hunter came upon the wreckage in a remote area. Personnel from Veterans Affairs Canada and the Department of National Defence went to Burma and recovered the airmen's remains. The men were laid to a final rest in a special ceremony in Rangoon in 1997.

The efforts of the Canadians who served in the Burma Campaign during the Second World War were impressive but came at a great cost. Exact numbers are hard to come by as the Canadians who served with the RAF were usually included with the rest of the British forces and no separate records were kept. However, of the estimated 8,000 Canadians who served in the region, approximately 500 men died and many others were wounded or captured. The difficult experiences of the Veterans of the war in Asia would take a high physical and emotional toll—a toll that, for many, lasted a lifetime.



Spitfire pilots trading old clothing for eggs with Burmese man. DND, PL-60252.

Japanese surrender ceremony, September 1945. LAC, PA-147118.



## THE LEGACY

In the Naga Hills of eastern India, north of the border with Burma, is the famous Kohima Memorial, which marks the place where Allied forces turned back a Japanese invasion of India in 1944. While the Commonwealth soldiers who fell here did not include any members of the Canadian military, Canadian airmen were involved in the fierce fighting. At the base of the monument are the words of John Maxwell Edmonds, a British poet who originally wrote the lines to commemorate the men who died in the First World War—an epitaph that also poignantly summarizes the contributions of the Canadians who died in the cause of peace and freedom over the years:

“When You Go Home, Tell Them of Us and Say, For Your Tomorrow, We Gave Our Today.”

The Canadians who served in the Burma Campaign were among the more than one million men and women from Canada who served during the Second World War. The efforts of all these Canadians helped to ensure that victory was achieved. The sacrifices and achievements of those who gave so much to restore peace and freedom to the world cannot be forgotten.

The Canadian participation in this theatre of war had another, more unexpected result as well. The contact of men from other Allied forces with these Canadians was often the catalyst that would eventually see them emigrate to our country after the war. These men would be welcomed warmly by the Canadian Veteran community and close bonds were created that endure to this day.

## CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by Canada’s Veterans during times of war, conflict and peace, and to become involved in remembrance activities that will help to preserve their legacy for future generations of Canadians.

To learn more about Canada’s role in Asia during the Second World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at [veterans.gc.ca](http://veterans.gc.ca) or call, toll free, **1-866-522-2122**.

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