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### A Close View of the Disaster at the Sittang Bridge.

Reminiscence by E.R.B. Hudson, Chiang Mai, Thailand, as told to Bob Bergin, Alexandria, VA (bbergin99@gmail.com).

*When the Japanese invaded Burma in January 1942, their main thrust from Thailand came through southern Burma instead of the central part of the country where the British expected it. Their 55<sup>th</sup> Division broke through British defenses at the Kawkaeik pass, then headed for Moulmein, an important town at the mouth of the Salween River. The Japanese took Moulmein ten days later, and the British withdrew to the Bilin River. After a fierce battle there, the British started to fall back to the Sittang River, the last major obstacle between the Japanese and Rangoon, the Burmese capital and a port vital to the British. Their decision to demolish the bridge across the Sittang on 23 February left two of the Indian Army 17<sup>th</sup> Division's three brigades on the wrong side of the river at the mercy of the pursuing Japanese Army, which killed or captured most of the marooned troops, then moved upstream and crossed the river easily. The way to Rangoon was open.*

*The British decision to blow the bridge when they did has been debated almost from the moment the fuses were lit. Historian Jon Latimer called it "a defining moment in the decline and fall of the British Empire."<sup>1</sup> Maj. E.R.B. "Roy" Hudson had a unique view of that moment. A young subaltern in the British army, he set some of the explosive charges on the bridge. Today he lives in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where he settled after his retirement from the British Army in 1959. His recollections of the night of 23 February 1942 and the days preceding it remain vivid.*

*The following account is based on an interview with Major Hudson on 27 January 2007 at Chiang Mai. The interview was recorded, and Hudson reviewed an edited transcript for accuracy. —B.B.*



Roy Hudson, ca. 1942

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I went to war in Burma with the Malerkotla Field Company, a rather special unit. It descended directly from the cavalry and infantry of the Ruler of Malerkotla that first saw in action in the year 1446. In India, in the old days, there were three armies, one from Bengal, one from Madras, and one from Bombay. And there were many different Indian states that maintained an infantry battalion, a gunner battery, or a camel corps. Six of the states kept an engineer unit, known as sappers and miners.

My unit was raised and kept in being by a little state named Malerkotla. Every time there was trouble in the British Empire, the ruler of the state, the Nawab of Malerkotla, put the unit at the disposal of the Imperial Service. The Malerkotlas were reorganized as Imperial Sappers and Miners in 1892. They earned great battle honors during Boxer Rebellion, in World War I at Ypres and Flanders, and in Afghanistan and north India.

I came out from England in early 1941. I was bored with the phony war in Europe, and volunteers were needed to expand the Indian army. I joined the Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners. By November 1941, I was the senior subaltern of the one of their affiliated units, the Malerkotla Field Company, which was preparing

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1. *Burma: The Forgotten War* (London: John Murray, 2004) 58. [B.B.]

for service in Burma. We landed in Rangoon in December 1941, and spent Christmas in the Shan states in central Burma. My section was sent out on tasks in support of 13<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade. After the Japanese invaded and Indian Army 17<sup>th</sup> Division started to pull back to the Sittang, the Marlekotlas were part of the reinforcements sent to the 17<sup>th</sup> Division.

We were ordered to prepare for demolition of the road and railway bridges south of Kyaikto, a small town east of the Sittang. The 17<sup>th</sup> Indian division had been withdrawing through Kyaikto all through the night of 20 February. After the last troops crossed the bridge at about 0800 hours, the commander of the 3/7<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles gave me the order to blow it. When that was done, my section got in our truck and we joined the end of a long, slow-moving line of vehicles and marching infantry that were heading for the Sittang bridge, about fifteen miles away.

It turned into a long, exhausting journey. There was no real road, just a track cut through the jungle and cleared by burning. Everything was covered with ash. Aircraft appeared in the sky, three RAF Hurricanes. I saw the RAF roundels. The next thing I knew, the Hurricanes came down to treetop level and started to machine gun us. We jumped out of our trucks, ran in amongst the trees and threw ourselves flat. For the rest of that day, we were sporadically attacked by the RAF and even by American Volunteer Group (AVG) Tomahawks, who thought they were attacking Japanese columns. We spent much of the day diving for cover. It slowed us down tremendously. It was at dusk before we reached our company headquarters near the Sittang bridge.

We were filthy and hungry. I had just settled into my “bath, canvas, officers for the use of,” when our company commander Maj. R.C. Orgill came by and told me that he had orders to prepare the Sittang bridge for demolition. That was not an easy task. It was a single track railway bridge with huge girders. There were eleven spans, and each span was 140 feet long. Our company was to cross the river and start work immediately, but Major Orgill set another task for me. He showed me a small railway bridge marked on the map. I was to take a few sappers and blow up it up.

With a Jemadar (Viceroy’s commissioned officer) and six men, I set off into a dark, moonless night to find the bridge we were supposed to destroy. I walked the river bank all the way to the Sittang bridge and back, but never found it. I came to realize that what appeared as a bridge on the map was really a culvert, with about forty foot of earth on top of it. The few pounds of gelignite I had would not make much difference, so I fixed the charge to the railway tracks, then set out in my truck to rejoin my unit at the Sittang bridge to obtain further orders.

I found a long queue of vehicles waiting to cross. The bridge was narrow, and planks had been placed over the sleepers of the single track railway so that trucks could drive over it. It stood probably seventy or eighty feet above the river, and driving required care and a bit of nerve. One driver had put a wheel over, and his truck became wedged between the girders. They would have chucked it into the river, but they couldn’t budge it. There was no way to lift it out. It took four or five hours to get it out of the way.

When the queue started moving again, I got back in my truck. On the approach to the bridge, I heard the sound of firing. At first I thought someone was burning bamboo to have a cup of tea—bamboo crackles when you burn it—but it was rifle fire, and then machine guns. Once across the bridge, I told the driver to go on to where our headquarters had been set up on the west bank, about three miles further on. I took a Tommy gun and ran back across the bridge. On the east bank I found another officer with a Bren gun, and the two of us set up a defensive position.

Upstream we could see people from a nearby village get into the water and try to swim away. We saw the splash of bullets as the Japanese fired on them with machine guns. They killed every one of them. What had happened was that the Japanese had cut between the first of our retreating brigades and the two that followed. The first brigade formed a small bridgehead on the east bank.

I looked back down the bridge then and saw Major Orgill. My duty was to be on the bridge with him, so I walked to where he was. We found that the bridge had already been partly prepared for demolition. Timber boxes were fixed around the girders of three adjacent spans to contain the charges, but someone had removed all the explosives. (We found the explosives cached on the west bank. Later we learned that it was

the Governor General of Burma who had ordered their removal. He felt that preparing the bridge for demolitions would hurt the morale of the Burmese.)

We started on the three spans where the work had been started. I took the center span. There was a shortage of demolition stores. The charges on the center span were to be set off by electric detonators; charges on the other two by “Fuse Instantaneous Detonating” or “FID”—which was not reliable.

We finished about three o'clock in the afternoon. We had been under fire much of the time and could hear bullets pinging off the girders as we worked. Our chaps had to climb all over them, but only two sappers were slightly wounded. When everything was ready, I unrolled the electrical wire and found there was not enough to reach the bank. I had to set up the exploder box on the bridge itself, about a hundred yards from the west bank.

I carried a galvanometer, a little testing device that put a very weak current through the circuit. I was very nervous when I hooked it up, but the little light flickered, and I knew that the circuit was complete. I reported to my Officer Commanding that the bridge was ready to be blown—although I would have to be on the bridge to do it.

Not much later, the Japanese laid down a tremendous barrage of mortar and artillery fire on the bridgehead. The bridgehead commander, Brig. Noel Hugh-Jones decided to withdraw the troops holding the east bank. That left me with the exploder box, standing in the middle of the bridge, while several hundred infantry passed by me. Finally, one of the Gurkha officers found an old Vickers machine gun, and built a little sandbag emplacement in front of me. I was a bit safer then. When everyone was withdrawn, I was told that if I saw a Japanese step on to the bridge, to blow it up.

We waited and watched, but nothing happened. Brigadier Hugh-Jones decided to reform the bridgehead, and the same infantry who had passed me by now returned to the east bank. By then it was about five o'clock in the evening. I had eaten nothing all that day and hadn't slept in over sixty hours. My topi (pith helmet) had fallen in the river and I had been working in the sun. I must have looked knackered. Major Orgill had a look at me and told me to get back to headquarters.

Major Orgill put one of our subalterns on the exploder box, Bashir Ahmed Khan, who everyone called “BAK.” He actually was from the state of Malerkotla and the only native officer in the unit who had not been replaced by Royal Engineers. He was very efficient.

I walked the two or three miles back to our headquarters. I ate and cleaned up, felt much better, and went back to the bridge. It was a pitch black night. I found my little group on the bank, one or two smoking cigarettes, Major Orgill among them. They had found some more electric wire and BAK was able to run it off the bridge. They had dug a deep foxhole in the river bank near a bridge abutment and set up the exploder box there. Major Orgill said everything was all right, and told me to go back and get some sleep. About four o'clock in the morning, I was woken by a huge explosion. I knew the bridge had gone up.

What had happened was that as the night went on, Brigadier Hugh-Jones became nervous about the Japanese capturing the bridge intact. Enemy pressure had increased; the bridge was continuously being swept by fire. He thought the Japanese could land a raiding party behind us and take the bridge. At about 0400 he rang the general officer commanding of the division, Maj. Gen. J.G. “Jackie” Smyth, a Victoria Cross holder from the First World War. Smyth was eight miles away when he should have been up front.

Before making the call, Hugh-Jones asked if Major Orgill could guarantee to blow up the bridge if the Japanese took the bridgehead after daylight. Orgill said he could not make any guarantees; anything could happen during the night. The Japanese might overwhelm the defenders, or enemy mortar fire could cut the electric wires on the charges. Orgill said he was ready now, but he could not say he would still be able to do it tomorrow. That was when Hugh-Jones decided to phone for permission to blow the bridge. His phone call was taken by Brig. D.T. Cowan, who woke Smyth. It took five minutes get a decision.

Smyth had two options. He could say “no” and risk the bridge being taken. The way to Rangoon would be open then, and reinforcements still landing in Rangoon would be cut off. Option two was to blow the bridge. This would deny it to the Japanese, but would cost Smyth the loss of two of his brigades on the east bank.

Smyth gave the order to blow the bridge. Cowan called Hugh-Jones and said “blow it.” When Hugh-Jones passed the order to Major Orgill, BAK was standing next to Orgill and heard him say that he would like it in writing, but Hugh-Jones refused. The troops on the bridgehead were ordered to withdraw. Orgill told BAK to wait for five minutes after he received an all-clear signal, first light the fuses, and then actuate the electrical exploder.

BAK did exactly that. There was a tremendous bang. A rush of water surged up the bank, collapsed the sides of BAK’s foxhole, and almost buried him alive. Two of the spans went down immediately. The third was badly damaged, but did not collapse completely.

Once the bridge was blown, the Japanese took no further interest in it. They went up river and looked for another place to cross. The 16<sup>th</sup> and 46<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigades that had been withdrawing toward the Sittang were now left on the east bank, encircled by the Japanese. Because the Japanese broke off the battle when the bridge was blown, many of our troops on the east bank were able to cross the river. A party of Malerkotla sappers, still on the east bank, helped by making flotation devices out of bamboo, petrol tins, or anything that floated. Some of the troops got across, but many drowned trying. Some were able to clamber over broken bits of the bridge with the help of rope strung between the downed sections. Jackie Smyth said later that about thirty-five hundred escaped the Japanese. That left about five thousand who were killed or captured.<sup>2</sup>

Those left on the far bank would later be very critical of Smyth and Hugh-Jones. Hugh-Jones collapsed on the river bank as he knew that the bulk of 17<sup>th</sup> Division was still on the east side. His hair turned white almost over night. He was put on a hospital ship and eventually evacuated. After the war he asked repeatedly to be court-martialed. One day, he went to the seaside, took off his clothes, walked into the sea and never came back.

Jackie Smyth was given the sack immediately by Gen. Sir Archibald Wavell. They traveled back to Calcutta together, with Smyth in the back of the plane where Wavell never spoke with him.

What happened at the bridge has been questioned. It was a serious error for Smyth, the divisional commander, to be eight miles away from the bridge that night, and out of touch with what was happening. He left Hugh-Jones in charge to get medical attention and to be closer to his rendezvous with Lieutenant General Hutton early next morning.

Smyth’s health was a big factor that affected his judgment. He was in almost constant pain from an anal fissure. His health problems started earlier that year, while he was still in India. He was scheduled to go to the Middle East and suddenly given command of the 17<sup>th</sup> India Division on its way to Burma. In February, when the 17<sup>th</sup> was already fighting in Burma, the senior Medical Officer in Burma insisted that Smyth go before a medical board. The board was held, and as it turned out, Smyth’s own Medical Officer headed it, and Smyth had “had a word with him beforehand.” It was no surprise that the board pronounced Smyth fit, but recommended two months rest at the first opportunity. Smyth’s pain continued and it was difficult for him to sit in a jeep. He was given injections of arsenic and strychnine to keep him going.

It would seem obvious that if a senior officer is not fit, he should report in sick, and be treated like a normal casualty. The troops have a right to expect this. It is their lives on the line. Smyth was proud of never having reported sick in the whole of his service. His refusal to do so affected the outcome of the 1942 Burma campaign. After he left Burma, Smyth spent eight months in hospital in India.

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2. Cf. [Field-Marshal Viscount] William J. Slim, *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* (NY: Cooper Square, 2000) 14: “By the afternoon of the 24th, all that had reached the west bank of the eight battalions that had been cut off was under two thousand officers and men, with five hundred and fifty rifles, ten Bren guns and twelve Tommy guns between them. Almost all were without boots, and most were reduced to their underwear.... This was the decisive battle of the first campaign. After it, however gallantly our troops fought, there was little hope of holding Rangoon. And when Rangoon went, as it did on the 9<sup>th</sup> March, the whole army in Burma was cut off from the outside world almost as effectively as had been the two brigades on the east bank of the Sittang.” [B.B.]