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Slim's Welsh General:
*Major-General 'Pete' Rees in the Burma Campaign**

by Alan Jeffreys, BA, MPhil

Thomas Wynford Rees was born in Barry in 1898, the son of Reverend T. M. Rees. In fact, his place of birth stayed with him throughout his military career for when he commanded 19th Indian Division during the Burma Campaign he was known as 'the Docker' to the Welsh troops in his division. He was also known as 'Dai' or 'Pete' to the British troops in his division, 'General Sahib Bahadur' (Bahadur meaning brave) to the Indian troops and 'Napoleon' to the 14th Army generally. He led his troops from the front and was very prominent as he always wore a red scarf which were the divisional colours.¹ The 14th Army Commander, General 'Bill' Slim commented in his memoir:

This was the first time the division had been in action, but the troops, a high proportion of whom were pre-war regulars, advanced with the greatest dash, led literally by their dynamic commander, Pete Rees, known to his British troops as the 'Pocket Napoleon', a reference to his size and his success in battle. What he lacked in inches he made up by the miles he advanced. Whether he was hallooing his troops from the roadside or leading them in his jeep, he was an inspiring divisional commander. The only criticism I made was to point out to him that the best huntsmen did not invariably ride ahead of their hounds.²

His early military career included service with the 125th Napier's Rifles in Mesopotamia and Palestine during the First World War where he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and the Military Cross. In the 1920s and 1930s like most Indian Army officers, he saw service on the North West Frontier in the Waziristan Campaign as well as serving as an instructor at Royal Military College Sandhurst. One slightly unusual posting during this period was two years as Private Secretary to his father-in-law, Sir Charles

* A lecture delivered to the Society at the British Academy, London, on 25 October 2005, with Dr John Elliott, Chairman of the Council, in the chair. The author is grateful to Lord Rees and Dr Daniel Marston for their help.

¹ See *The Story of the 19th Indian (Dagger) Division* quoted in John Hill, *China Dragons: A rifle company at war, Burma 1944-45* (London, 1991), 13, 48-49. See also Philip Louis Daniel, reel 3, No. 19670, Imperial War Museum (IWM), Sound Records Archive, Roland Henry 'Ron' Nappin, reel 3, No. 20593, IWM SR, Ken Chesson, reel 5, No. 19068, IWM SR.

² Field Marshal Sir William Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (London, 1956), 390.

Alexander Innes, the Governor of Burma. On the outbreak of the Second World War, Rees was commander of the 3rd Battalion, 6th Rajputana Rifles.

During the Second World War the Indian Army was the largest volunteer army. Indian Army divisions fought in the Middle East, North Africa, East Africa, Italy and went to make up the overwhelming majority of troops in the Far East.³ In fact, two and a third million personnel served in the Indian Armed Forces and India provided the base for supplies for the Middle East and South East Asian theatres. As Major-General Henry 'Taffy' Davies, another Welshman who commanded 25th Indian Division in Burma, commented in his memoir:

The Division, as all soldiers know, is the basic fighting formation in practically every army in the world. It is large and powerful enough with its establishment of about 17,000 men, to effect a decisive influence in any military operation, irrespective of the scale of campaign. At the same time, it is sufficiently compact to enable its commander to exercise a personal leadership and control and to permit its functioning as a well co-ordinated team. In the British Army, during two world wars, the Divisional spirit has been something which has been fostered and nourished as an important matter of principle.⁴

Four Indian Army divisions fought in the Middle East and Mediterranean campaigns, the first of which was 4th Indian Division. Rees was promoted to Colonel in 1940 and was General Staff Officer 1st Grade (GSO1) with 4th Indian Division where he was involved with the Western Desert Force at the Battle at Sidi Barrani, 11 December 1940. The plan for Operation Compass, as it was originally called, was that 4th Indian Division would attack the Italian camps from the rear at night through the 15 mile gap between the camps at Rabia and Nibeiwa, supported by 7th Armoured Division. According to 4th Indian Division Operational Order No. 2, which was written by Rees: 'The Arty will produce concentrations of smoke and H.E. to cover the approach of the Tanks, and will keep their fire on the targets as long as possible.'⁵ The tanks would then advance followed by the infantry twenty minutes afterwards. Supply dumps were set up half-way between Matruh and Nibeiwa. Training was of the utmost importance, Lieutenant-General Sir Geoffrey Evans, who was at the time Brigade Major to Brigadier Savory in 11th Indian Brigade,

³ Indian Army infantry divisions usually consisted of three brigades: one battalion in the brigade would be British and other two Indian or Gurkha. The gunner regiments were all British whereas the mountain artillery was Indian. The sappers were Indian as were the signals and other administrative services with British NCO's in technical appointments.

⁴ Major-General H. L. Davies, 'Small Green Men' (unpublished memoir), 126, IWM 66/82/1.

⁵ 4th Indian Division Operational Order No. 2, Rees Papers Mss Eur F 274/13

wrote: 'We were sent out into the desert in July 1940. Before and since then our training for desert warfare had been hard and continuous. We were fit, we were tough and we were ready for battle.'⁶ A replica of Nibeiwa was set up in the desert. Training Exercise No. 1 took place on 26 November led by 4th Indian Division Commanding Officer, Major-General Sir Noel Beresford-Peirse. He used the tactics laid out in the training pamphlet 'The Division in the Attack' based on First World War experience. According to Middle East Training Pamphlet No. 10:

The exercise was of the greatest value. It showed clearly that alterations would have to be made in some tactical methods. As a result a training memorandum was issued, many of the methods advocated therein being adopted for the operations and later were proved to be sound.⁷

General Richard O'Connor, Commander Western Desert Force, and his commanders also thought it was too long-winded. He therefore added a diversionary attack by a battalion on the eastern face of Nibeiwa. The battle went according to plan, helped by the fact that they were regular soldiers who had been properly trained in the desert and in close co-operation of infantry, tanks and artillery and in addition had Naval and Royal Air Force support. 11th Indian Brigade led by Brigadier Reginald Savory, supported by 7th Royal Tank Regiment with 48 Matilda's and 4th Indian Divisional Artillery with 72 guns managed to slip through the gap undetected and formed up around Nibeiwa. The diversionary attack on the eastern face of Nibeiwa by 4/7th Rajput Regiment was at 5am, 9 December, at 7am the main attack on the camp included an artillery bombardment and tank advance on the northwest entrance followed by the 2nd Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders and the 6th Rajputana Rifles. The Italian anti-tank weapons were unable to penetrate the tanks but their artillery fought well. By 10.40am 2,000 prisoners and 35 tanks had been taken for a loss of eight officers and 48 men.

Brigadier Lloyd and 5th Indian Infantry Brigade again supported by 7th Royal Tank Regiment attacked Tummar West that was equally successful. The artillery attack was 1.35pm and 22 tanks attacked at 1.50pm with the 1st Battalion Royal Fusiliers following twenty minutes later, followed by the 3/1st Punjab Regt. No Italian tanks were met only artillery this time, once again the tanks were immune and they took the gun positions with infantry support. The same tanks then attacked Tummar East supported by 4th Battalion Rajputana Rifles of 5th Brigade. The Italians launched a counterattack on Tummar West but

⁶ Geoffrey Evans, *The Desert and the Jungle* (London, 1959), 17.

⁷ Middle East Training Pamphlet No. 10, Lessons of the Cyrenaica Campaign December 1940 - February 1941, p. 3.

were caught by the machine guns of the Rajputana Rifles and the 1st Battalion Royal Northumberland Fusiliers. There were some 400 Italian casualties in a ten minute action. 16th British Brigade and 11th Indian Brigades isolated Sidi Barrani which was taken, marking the end of the thirty-six hours' battle. 38,300 Italian prisoners, 237 guns and 73 tanks were taken whereas British and Indian losses were 624 killed, wounded and missing. However, 4th Indian Division had already been earmarked for the Sudan and were replaced by 6th Australian Division. There were a number of reasons that the battle had been so successful one was good intelligence, the Commonwealth forces knew the strengths and whereabouts of all the Italian forces. Training was very important, in particular the training exercise and according to report on the battle:

In fact, the Exercise was an excellent full scale rehearsal for the forthcoming operations. From this exercise lessons were deduced and the tactical ideas and necessary tactical and administrative arrangements for the Exercise were studied, discussed and prearranged after considerable thought and discussion.⁸

Other lessons included successful secrecy surrounding the operation so much so that the second training exercise was the real operation. In fact, 'The operations were favoured by good fortune. Generally speaking, everything went according to plan as far as 4 IND DIV was concerned; the enemy was undoubtedly surprised...'.⁹ Sidi Barani showed what well-trained and all arms co-operation could achieve at an early stage of the Second World War. A lesson Rees learnt and used to good effect throughout the Second World War.

From March 1941 Rees took command of a brigade, 10th Brigade in 5th Indian Division which fought in the Battle of Keren. By March 1942 he was in command of a Division, namely 10th Indian Division which had previously been commanded by General 'Bill' Slim before Slim was recalled to oversee the retreat from Burma, so Rees' rise was fairly meteoric only to be relieved of his command on 21 June 1942 over a misunderstanding over the defence of Sollum. The 10th Indian division had relieved the New Zealand Division and was ordered to hold Sollum at all costs for 72 hours. The Corps Commander, Lieutenant-General Gott, ordered that the division continue to hold it. However, Rees thought that 10th Division:

Unsupported by adequate armour, would be unlikely to be able to hold the Sollum position against a prolonged full-scale enemy attack. I submit that

⁸ Report on Capture by 4th Indian Division of Enemy positions at Nibeiwa, The Tummars, etc. south of Sidi Barrani culminating in the capture of Sidi Barrani itself 9, 10, 11 December 1940, Rees Papers, Mss Eur F 274/14.

⁹ Ibid.

we have ample evidence of this and of the fact that my appreciation of the situation was correct. Indeed, General Gott himself, less than six hours later, gave my successor instructions to evacuate the position because it was realised it was untenable.¹⁰

Gott, who had only been in charge of the division for a day, seemed to have overreacted, admitted that he might have been 'hasty' in making his decision. He wrote in his report on the incident on 21 June 1942: 'I consider Maj-Gen. Rees lacks the self-confidence, vigour and robust outlook which are absolutely necessary for the commander of the Sollum Box, and that if he remains in command I cannot expect the resolute defence of this post which is an essential part of the Army Commander's plan'.¹¹ This was backed up by his superior General Ritchie, 8th Army Commander, who commented: 'I concur. I have dealt direct with Gen Rees on several occasions during the past month & I do not feel that he possesses the resolute determination required. I feel he is probably a better staff officer than a commander.'¹² However, this opinion was not shared by General Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief Middle East but was also a fellow Indian Army officer, who wrote to his opposite number in India, whilst Rees was occupied in organising the western defences of Cairo:

I have known Major-General Rees for some years and have always had the highest opinion of his military knowledge and powers of leadership. I know he has proved himself a first rate staff officer and I understand he was an excellent brigade commander. In fact, I specially asked for him as commander of the 10th Division when that appointment fell vacant earlier in the year.

I feel that the opinion of Gens. Ritchie and Gott must carry weight coming as it does from two commanders of great experience in the field and that it can not be ignored in any way. Nevertheless, I feel that their acquaintance with General Rees was short and their personal knowledge of him limited, though General Ritchie had known him for many years and had previously had a high opinion of him.

This being so I consider that Major-General Rees should be given a second trial in a Major-General's command, or failing this, that his abilities should be made use of in a Major-General's staff appointment.¹³

¹⁰ Rees Papers, Mss Eur F274/16

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

This second chance came in October 1942 when he was appointed divisional commander of 19th Indian Division which is the main concern of this paper. 19th Indian Division was formed at Secunderabad on 1 October 1941 and along with 25th Indian Division defended Southern India in 1942 and 1943. The Division was made up of three Brigades: 62nd, 64th and 98th Indian Infantry Brigades.¹⁴

The War in the Far East began in December 1941 and where in five months until May 1942, the British Empire suffered the most humiliating series of defeats in its history as Hong Kong, Malaya, Borneo, Singapore and Burma fell in rapid succession to the seemingly unstoppable Imperial Japanese Army. Three years later the Japanese Army suffered its worst defeat at the hands of the 14th Army in Burma. The majority of these troops were Indian Army who provided three Indian Corps and eight infantry divisions, along with two British Divisions, two West African and one East African. In numerical terms there were about 340,000 Indian troops, 100,000 British and 90,000 African troops. Prior to the Second World War, the Indian Army's main role was acting in aid to civil power and Imperial Policing on India's borders, in particular the North West Frontier, and was not capable of fighting a modern army. In the early years of the war it underwent an expansion programme which doubled the numbers of the Indian Army.¹⁵ In addition, the jungles of South East Asia were an alien environment for Indian Army troops as well as other Commonwealth troops which contributed greatly to the early defeats in the Far East.

The turning point in the fortunes of the Indian Army came after the disastrous Retreat from Burma and the First Arakan campaigns. Generally the Arakan campaign, which was described by one historian as 'perhaps the worst managed British military effort of the war', caused military and civilian morale in India to plummet.¹⁶ The appointments of Generals Savory, Auchinleck and Slim as Inspector of Infantry, Commander-in-Chief India and 14th Army Commanding Officer respectively have been seen by Raymond Callaghan as an important factor in the eventual defeat of the Japanese. He

¹⁴ In 62nd Indian Brigade the British Battalion was the 2nd Battalion, The Welch Regiment who won the first war-time Madras Cup at Rugby in 1942. In 1943 Major B. T. V. Cowey joined the battalion and ended up commanding the battalion. He had been capped four times as a Welsh international and had captained the 1st Battalion Welch Regimental rugby team which won the Army Rugby cup in 1935, 1937 and 1939. Under him the 2nd Welch won the Bombay Cup in 1943 beating the South Wales Borderers in the final. See 'War-Time Rugby Football in the 2nd Battalion', *Men of Harlech: The Journal of The Welch Regiment*, Vol. XL, No. 66, January-March 1946, 25. See also *The Bulletin of the Military Historical Society*, Vol. 48, No. 191, February 1998, 162.

¹⁵ See Alan Jeffreys, 'Jungle Warfare Doctrine and Training of the British and Indian Infantry in South East Asia, 1941-1945', MPhil, King's College London (2003), 22-23.

¹⁶ Raymond Callaghan, *Burma 1942-1945* (London, 1978), 59.

commented: 'It helped of course that the key figures in Indian military affairs were, for the first time in the war, all drawn from the Indian Army' and thus understood the traditions and ways of the Indian Army.¹⁷ A range of experienced Divisional Commanders were also appointed under Slim and 'Pete' Rees was one of these.

These changes in combination with the Infantry Committee, which sat in the first two weeks of June 1943, marked the upturn in the development of the British and Indian armies in the war against Japan. The committee recommended, among other proposals, the setting up of two training divisions in order to teach jungle warfare to reinforcements and the need for a jungle warfare doctrine. General Auchinleck implemented these proposals. The publication of the 4th edition Military Training Pamphlet No. 9 re-named *The Jungle Book* assimilated all the lessons of previous manuals and memorandum and included the lessons from Malaya, the retreat from Burma and the First Arakan as well as from the American and Australian experiences of fighting the Japanese in the South West Pacific. It formed the basis of jungle fighting methods used by the Indian Army for the remainder of the Second World War and later formed the blueprint for two war office manuals in 1944-45, demonstrating that it was the Indian Army rather than the British Army who pioneered jungle warfare doctrine.¹⁸ India Command under the direction of General Auchinleck re-orientated all training establishments in India to teach jungle warfare and produce a supply of jungle trained instructors, cadres and complete units. This new training structure developed very quickly and in the words of the historian, F. W. Perry: 'by the end of 1943 India had developed a more comprehensive training organisation than any other country at that time'.¹⁹ These changes provided the basis for uniformly jungle trained troops ready to defeat the terrain, the climate, the diseases and the Japanese. 19th Indian Division underwent jungle training at Coimbatore, which was completed by December 1943. As Rees commented on the jungle in a lecture on the Burma campaign:

With regard to the jungle itself, it is chiefly a matter of getting used to it and having the necessary equipment, which we now have, hacking knives etc. and even green coloured underwear and towels – green so that we can wash it and hang it out to dry without the fear of Japanese aircraft spotting it which would happen with white clothes against the jungle green background.²⁰

¹⁷ Raymond Callaghan, 'The Jungle, the Japanese and the Sepoy' (unpublished paper for the New Military History of South Asia Conference, Cambridge, 15-17 July 1997), 7.

¹⁸ See Jeffreys, 'Jungle Warfare', 92-109.

¹⁹ F. W. Perry, *The Commonwealth Armies: Manpower and Organisation in Two World Wars* (Manchester, 1988), 111.

²⁰ Major-General T. W. Rees, 'The Burma Campaign 1944-1945', 1, Rees Papers, Mss Eur F 274/45.

The first successful action in the jungle fought by the Indian Army were the defensive battles fought by 5th and 7th Indian Divisions in the Second Arakan campaign. Jungle training and new defensive tactics had proved effective. This growing ascendancy over the Japanese in the jungle was re-emphasised when the Imperial Japanese Army made its main attack, Operation U-GO, later that Spring. Its prime objective was the speedy capture of Imphal by the 15th Army, under General Renya Mutaguchi, to forestall the imminent Allied invasion of Burma. During the Battles for Kohima and Imphal the Commonwealth Armies inflicted a crushing defeat on the Imperial Japanese Army. In a letter from Slim to his old friend Lieutenant-Colonel Gibbs, he wrote: 'there is no doubt about it that the old Fourteenth Army has given him [the Japanese] the biggest defeat he has ever had in his whole history'.²¹

The 19th Indian Division joined IV Corps on the Imphal Plain in October 1944, after these battles. It was well-trained being the first standardised Indian Infantry division which meant that it was capable of fighting in all the roles that had previously been undertaken by four differing divisional organisations. According to John Hill who served as Company Commander with the Berkshire Regiment in the Division: 'The 19th Indian Division began to move up to India's north-east frontier in September 1944, each brigade with its Indian, Gurkha and British battalion- reputed to be the most trained division of any army anywhere.'²² By mid-December 1944 the Division had crossed the Chindwin at Sittaung, taken Pinlebu and linked up with 36th Division at Indaw coming down from the north. There was now an Allied front stretching from India to the Chinese border. They took Shwebo on 7 January 1945, the division had covered 400 miles in five weeks which was a proud achievement according to the Indian Army Official Historian.²³ Much of this march had been through thick jungle terrain as well as fighting the Japanese.

The battles for Mandalay and Meiktila are probably General 'Bill' Slim's greatest victories, in contrast to the Battles of Kohima and Imphal which were important but were essentially defensive battles. Operation Extended Capital, in contrast was a daring offensive operation. Slim is very popular in current British Army doctrine as an early exponent of 'manoeuvre warfare'. A recent biographer of Slim has commented: 'A "manoeuvrist" commander to use the rather jangling modern parlance, prizes above all the virtues of cunning and guile, seeks shamelessly to trick and deceive the enemy and bases his operational plan firmly upon the ruthless exploitation of the enemy's

²¹ Letter from General Slim to Lieutenant-Colonel H. R. K. Gibbs, 15 August 1944, IWM, Misc 54 item 824.

²² Hill, *China Dragons*, 27.

²³ See S. N. Prasad & P. N. Khera, *The Reconquest of Burma Volume II* (India & Pakistan, 1959), 212. See also Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 389-390.

weakness.'²⁴ This might also apply on a lower level of command to Rees as well as Slim. In Operation Capital, Slim had originally planned fighting a tank battle on the Schwebo plain against numerically superior Japanese forces. In Rees' own words:

General Slim Commander XIV Army planned to bring the Japs to battle in the plains to the NW of Mandalay and west of the R. Irrawaddy, where our preponderance in tanks and modern equipment, coupled with complete air superiority, would prove decisive if we could only get the Japs to stand and fight there.²⁵

But with the Japanese withdrawal behind the Irrawaddy river a new plan was adopted, Operation Extended Capital, whose aim remained the destruction of the Japanese army in Burma. It entailed crossing the Irrawaddy and fighting the decisive battle in the plains around Mandalay and Meiktila, the main Japanese supply base in Central Burma. Thus 14th Army had to cross the Irrawaddy but did not possess enough equipment to make a main crossing, instead a number of crossings were envisaged in order to deceive the enemy as to where the main attack would come from. Rees commented on Slim's plans:

His conception was to crush the Japs first in Central Burma where our air and modern equipment would be decisive; then to make a rapid advance to Rangoon. The crushing was to be achieved by a hammer blow from the north via Mandalay on to an anvil which he intended to create by establishing a force behind the Japs well to the south.²⁶

It was to be one of the most impressive actions by a Commonwealth Army during the Second World War. XXXIII Corps was to be the hammer and IV Corps the anvil.

The plan was for XXXIII Corps and 19th Indian Division (which was now under XXXIII Corps) to cross the Irrawaddy, north of Mandalay and then move towards the city. This diversion would give the impression to the Japanese that IV Corps was still in the north and XXXIII Corps in the south. The rest of XXXIII Corps, namely 2nd British Division and 20th Indian Division, would cross at Ngazun and the whole corps would encircle Mandalay. The Japanese forces would then engage the bulk of their forces in

²⁴ Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of modern Warfare* (London, 2004), 2.

²⁵ Major-General T. W. Rees, 'The Burma Campaign 1944-1945', 1, Rees Papers Mss Eur F274/45

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

the defence of Mandalay, whilst IV Corps would move south, cross at Nyaungu, and advance for Meiktila. This would give the major battle that General Slim desired. However, as the official historian pointed out: 'Slim not only held the initiative but the morale of his troops had never been higher. There were, however, no signs of any deterioration in the morale of the enemy, and it could be expected that every Japanese soldier would still be prepared to die rather than surrender.'²⁷

On 9 January 1945 Lieutenant Murrow and men of the 2nd Battalion Welch Regiment in 62nd Indian Infantry Brigade, 19th Indian Division were sent across the Irrawaddy at Thabeikkyn for reconnaissance. The rest of the division then crossed at Kyaukmyaung, 46 miles north of Mandalay, using rubber assault boats. Two regiments from the division, 2nd Welch and 1/6th Gurkhas, also established a bridgehead at Thabeikkyin, 20 miles to the north, as a further diversion, making the enemy think that the northern bridgehead was to link up with 36th Division. Both bridgeheads were held against repeated Japanese counter-attacks for 20 days and the Division contained Japanese troops caught on the eastern side of the river, particularly at Kabwet. The troops also took two tactical features inland - Minbaung Taung ridge and Pear Hill - both of which were key observation points. Rees commented on the crossings: 'What equipment we had to bring 500 miles by lorry. But the equipment was very short, ... To start with we could only cross at night... We got our tanks over a on a pontoon raft at night and by drowning their noise by low flying night-fighters and by judicious artillery and mortar fire we got them over unknown to the Japs'.²⁸ After the crossing, in a Special Order of the day to his division, Rees wrote:

Go on learning. Mistakes are inevitable, and we are fully conscious of them from time to time, even though we have been granted such successes. But we will profit by both, and I wish newcomers to the Division to be taught our fighting lessons as well as the fighting spirit and camaraderie among us all, of whatever caste or creed, on which so pride ourselves in the Dagger Division.

He went on: 'I know that, on many occasions, I have asked a lot of you; but you have never failed me. And you can rest assured that I will never call on you for efforts which I do not consider possible and justified.'²⁹

Rees drove the division straight for Mandalay down the Irrawaddy with the Shan mountains to the east, taking Tongyi and Madaya on the way. Taung-in

²⁷ Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan: Volume IV: The Reconquest of Burma* (London, 1965), 284.

²⁸ Rees, 'Burma Campaign', 7.

²⁹ Special Order of the Day in 19th Indian Division, February 1945, Rees Papers Mss Eur F274/35

was captured by the 2nd Battalion Welch Regiment on St David's Day. The village was given the code name of St David and according to the Regimental journal, *Men of Harlech*:

We had no support for this advance except our own mortars. During the advance we passed through a field of spring onions and many of the men wore them in their hats instead of leeks. We captured our objective late that evening at cost of three wounded. The General arrived in our perimeter just before dark and wished us "Dewi Sant."³⁰

Afterwards the Welch and 62nd Indian Infantry Brigade advanced towards the hill station of Maymyo. Rees then formed 'Stiletto Force' consisting of the Divisional Reconnaissance Battalion, 1/15 Punjab Regiment, along with C Squadron of 7th Cavalry and a troop of 150 Royal Armoured Corps, Gunners and Madras Sappers. 98th Indian Brigade captured Madaya from the West rather than from the north as the Japanese had expected as the Indian Official Historian remarked: 'What is still more remarkable about this operation is the fact that 98th Indian Infantry Brigade entered Madaya before the Japanese, who were attempting to fall back on the prepared positions in this area, could reach it.'³¹

The Division advanced for Mandalay, 98th Brigade in the middle on the railway axis, with 64th a mile to the east and Stiletto force advanced to the west along the side of the Irrawaddy and reached the north-west of Mandalay at 3 am on 8 March, encountering little opposition along the way and surprising the Japanese defenders. The same night the 4/4th Gurkhas of 98th Brigade were on the north-eastern end of Mandalay Hill, the 2nd Royal Berkshires cleared the Southern side of the hill but it took until the 11 March to clear the whole hill. This was a result of Rees' decision not to bomb the sacred places within the city.³² This just left Fort Dufferin, on 16 March in 'Exercise Duffy' the walls were bombarded by the RAF but the walls were not breached so the infantry attacks also failed. Further attacks failed until the Japanese defenders evacuated and Fort Dufferin was finally taken on 20 March. Members of the Division, namely 1/15th Punjab Regiment raised the Union Jack, the divisional flag and the regimental flag of the 1/15th Punjab Regiment on Fort Dufferin. On 21 March the city was declared clear and apparently Churchill declared in the House of Commons: 'Thank God they have got a place whose name we can pronounce.'³³ The formal raising for the Union Jack was done by the 14th

³⁰ '2nd Battalion Notes ... The Burma Campaign October 1944-August 1945', *Men of Harlech: The Journal of the Welch Regiment* Vol. XL, No. 66, January-March, 1946, 23.

³¹ *Reconquest of Burma, Volume II*, 352.

³² *Ibid.*, 355.

³³ *Ibid.*, 361.

Army Commander, General Slim who came across Rees just after the battle singing Welsh missionary hymns with Assamese soldiers, Slim wrote in his memoir: 'The fact that he sang in Welsh and they in Khasi only added to the harmony. I looked on admiringly. My generals had character. Their men knew them and they knew their men.'³⁴ According to Frank Owen's campaign history, had there been no breaches in the walls, Rees had contemplated capturing the fort from underground:

He recalled once, as a young officer attached to the Government of Burma's staff, he had explored a culvert which burrowed beneath the walls of the Fort and the moat itself. He sent a party of sappers to make a reconnaissance. By night they waded thigh-deep through the slime and water into the enemy camp. Had the Japanese fought a few days longer, Rees might have captured Fort Dufferin from beneath.³⁵

After the capture of Mandalay, Rees issued another Special Order of the Day congratulating 19th Indian Division:

It is that spirit which makes 19 Division the fine fighting Division that it is acknowledged to be – that, plus training. But as you know, it is the spirit (including our camaraderie between all races and creeds) which I regard as by far the more important. So keep up that spirit – always.

I thank you, all of you – all ranks of all arms and services – for all you have done. I told you I might well ask a lot of you, and I have indeed done so – but you have never failed me. I also promised you I would not demand the impossible, and I respect that promise. We will endeavour to go on with quiet confidence; not boasting, but trusting in providence, and determined to do our best.³⁶

In contrast to the earlier battles in the Reconquest of Burma, these battles were fought in the plains rather than jungle. All arms co-operation proved very effective as Rees commented: 'In this fighting from Mandalay to Meiktila the Japanese were really broken. Our Air Forces, British and American were most effective. Our tanks had country suited to them and they, very largely, were responsible for the enormous casualties inflicted on the Japanese'.³⁷

Major-General 'Pete' Rees was an inspirational divisional commander, as John Hill who served in 19th Indian Division commented:

³⁴ Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 468.

³⁵ Frank Owen, *Campaign in Burma* (London, 1947), 363.

³⁶ Special Order of the Day on the Capture of Mandalay, March 1945, Rees Papers, Mss Eur F274/31.

³⁷ Rees, 'Burma Campaign', 9.

As a divisional commander, his reputation for leading from the front was no mere newspaper correspondent's exuberance or rumour. It probably explains why, like Slim, he was regarded by all of us, Indians, Gurkhas and Britons alike, as a soldier's general. He shared our battle experiences and talked our language, whether Urdu, Gurkhali, Hindi, English or his native Welsh.³⁸

According to one of his GSOL's, the novelist John Masters, Rees had the reputation 'of being a ruthless fire-eater' but also 'inordinately brave'.³⁹ When Masters first joined the Division he followed Rees everywhere for his first week, he wrote in his memoir *The Road Past Mandalay*:

It was a racking experience. One day, after we had been sniped for an hour or so while standing near a forward platoon position, I asked him with heavy sarcasm whether we shouldn't paint his jeep red too, so that it would show up better where it was parked a few yards behind us. Pete thought it an excellent idea. I only prevented him having it done by pointing out that the fire it would draw would cause casualties to the signal and escort sections who had to follow him wherever he went.⁴⁰

Rees commanded 19th Indian Division until the end of the Second World War, then was given command of 4th Indian Division in December 1945. This formation went to make up the Punjab Boundary Force during Partition in 1947. It was an extremely difficult situation, in which Rees and the Punjab Boundary Force did all they could.⁴¹ In September 1947, he became Head of the Military Emergency Staff to the Emergency Committee of Cabinet in Delhi and retired from the Indian Army in 1948. He retired to South Wales and among many appointments became the Honorary Colonel of the 5th Battalion, The Welch Regiment, Territorial Army, he had previously been appointed Colonel of his Indian regiment, the Rajputana Rifles, from 1946-49. He died in 1959.

In conclusion, during the Second World War, and in the Burma campaign in particular, the Indian Army changed from an Imperial policing force and aid to civil power in 1939 to a modern professional army in 1945 making a huge contribution to the Allied cause. In the words of the Indian Army historian, Daniel Marston: 'The Indian Army had achieved a new level of professionalism; it was a fully modern, properly trained army, capable of

³⁸ Hill, *China Dragons*, 158.

³⁹ John Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay* (London, 1961), 292, 295.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁴¹ See Daniel Marston, 'The Punjab Boundary Force: A Reappraisal?' (Unpublished paper given to the War and Disorder in an Imperial Context Lecture Series, Oxford University, 18 November 2005), 1, 19-29.

dealing with almost any tactical situation with which it might be presented'.⁴² It went on to form the foundations of the modern professional armies of India and Pakistan from 1947 onwards. I'll leave the last words to Major-General 'Pete' Rees: 'Without boastfulness, and acknowledging Divine Blessing, XIV Army may indeed be proud of its achievements, its comradeship between all races and creeds, and its terrific fighting morale'.⁴³

⁴² Daniel Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign* (Westport, 2003), 203.

⁴³ Rees, 'Burma Campaign', 12.